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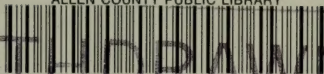
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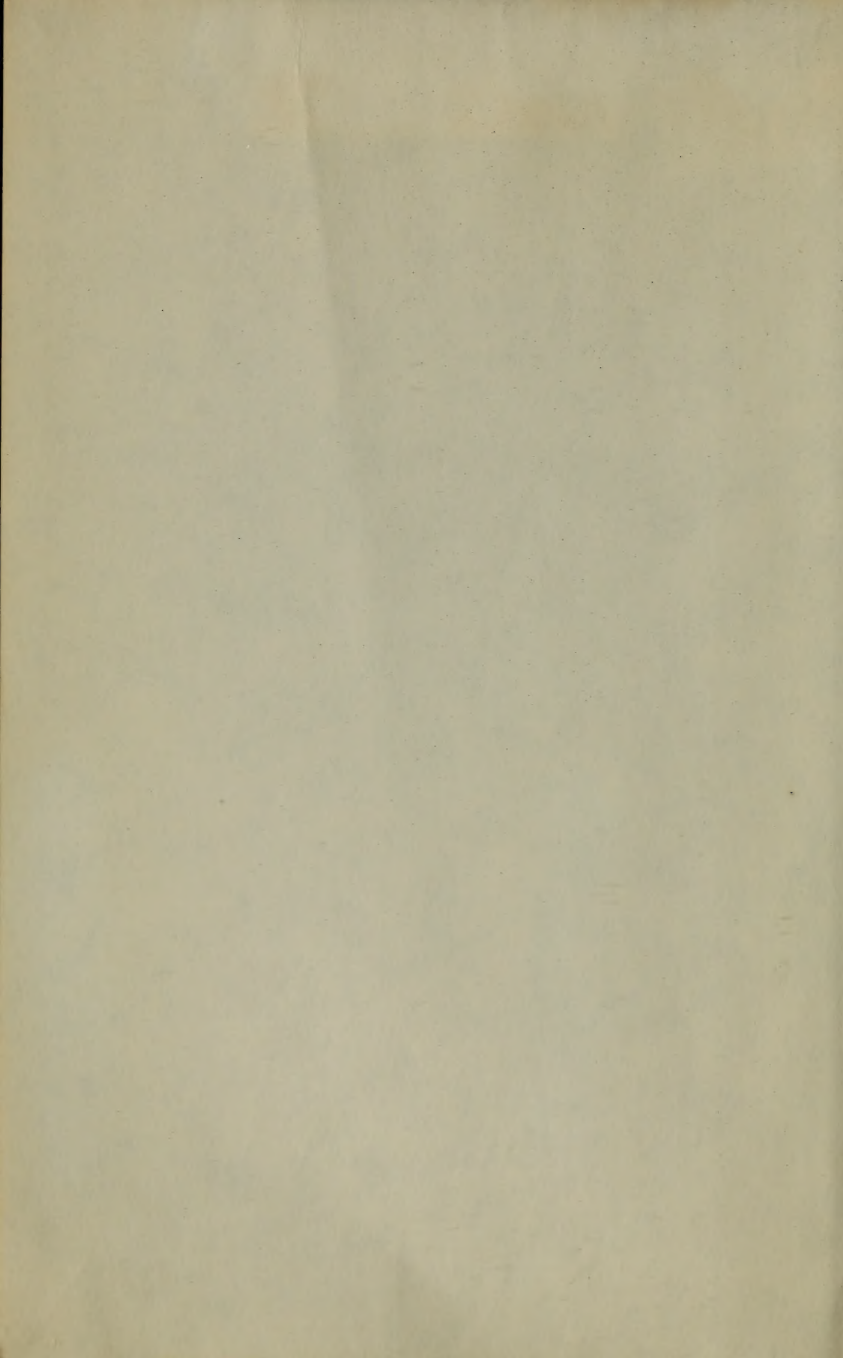
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CARAVANS TO SANTA FE



Quivering with rage, Consuelo stood still.

CARAVANS TO SANTA FE

By
ALIDA SIMS MALKUS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MARIE A. LAWSON



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CARAVANS TO SANTA FE

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CO. SCHOOLS



CARAVANS TO SANTA FE

Chapter I

AN OUTPOST OF SPAIN

A HUNDRED years ago, in a valley that lies on the slope of flame-shot mountains, a little town of ancient crooked streets slept in the sun, entirely shut away from outside civilization—a bit of old Spain, lying in rare and mellow beauty in the mountains of the Sangre de Cristo. Beyond the Cordilleras lay other ranges of rocky, snow-capped peaks, and beyond these again stretched hundreds of miles of barren desert, succeeded by still other hundreds of miles of rolling plains—a land of red men and bearded bison.

Through the streets of the adobe-walled *Villa*, the town of Santa Fe, life flowed with a sluggish content or took siesta. At this moment it was taking siesta. The cook slept with her bare toes spread in the cool mud beneath a dripping *olla*,

the wood boy and his *compadre*, the burro slept within a few feet of each other, the burro standing in the sun, the boy lying in the blue shadow of a wall. Doña Gertrudis Chaves y Lopez slept with open mouth, through which issued contented little whistles of escaping steam. Don Anabel Lopez himself slept, but not even sleep could relax the pride of his hawk nose, the defiance of his well-bred snore.

But Consuelo Lopez did not sleep; she lay in her bedroom, sulking. She was bored as only sixteen can be bored, and waved a naked foot in the air in rage. "*Bestia!*" she exploded, venting her angry thought. "*Moribundos!* The dead ones!" Reaching under her pillow, Consuelo drew out a silver case from which she extracted a cigarette. Slipping to a window where one long dazzling shaft of sunshine pierced a crack in the shutter, she held a small burning-glass over a wisp of paper. It flamed in a moment; the cigarette was lit, and she resumed her pose. A step sounded outside the door. Consuelo threw the cigarette disdainfully behind the bed, but the step passed on and she recovered it again before it had time to go out. It was fortunate that Doña Gertrudis was so insistent upon her daughter's beauty sleep. Consuelo would be permitted to indulge her boredom undisturbed for another

hour. A raging boredom she rather enjoyed, but not a languid one.

"They think it enough for me to sit here and twiddle my fan. To sit here and listen to Manuel! Tink-a-tinkaa, tink-a-tink, Thy heart so true! *Caramba!* I know everything he can say by heart. Rather would I marry myself to one of the rope-haired trappers or the barbaric Yanqui caravaners that come over the plains a-trading. They are men. What if they do lack *cultivacion*, and cannot roll their r's. They appeal to me. Yes!

"Ah, would but Don Tiburcio Garcia arrive, with something of the outside world about him, and the latest news from Chihuahua and Mexico City. And clothes, ah, what clothes! What will he think of me?"

Consuelo stretched herself reflectively upon the bed, tossing aside a hand-woven coverlet of drawn threads, and lifted the bare foot to catch a breeze stirring through deep-silled windows. She took from the carved chest of drawers beside her a wrought-gold mirror studded with pink semi-precious stones and carefully regarded her face from this angle and that. The sole imperfections that appeared within its frame were those of a cracked mercury back. Consuelo considered and approved the mirror's various re-

flections. They were more pleasant than her thoughts. In fact, her mirrored face was all that she cared about at the moment. Hers was that most charming of Spanish types, which in profile is straight-nosed, delicately cut, but which in full face appears childish, the nose short, a trifle broad, the eyes large and heavy-lidded, the lips full, petulant. There was strength in the squaring of the jaw and in level, heavily marked brows, scowling now with her rebellions.

Everything one wanted to do was prohibited—to dance with the caravaners, for example. Only disagreeable things were permitted. How could one consider one's suitors seriously if they were like Manuel, her second cousin, so eager that he bored beyond insults? He would be on hand this afternoon, singing his interminable verses. Well enough to have him as a sort of permanent court, even though Luis did make all sorts of fun of his cousin. But then, Luis was critical of everything; brothers generally were. He'd be a bit more respectful when he heard about Don Tiburcio! A *caballero* from the City of Mexico, a veritable Spanish grandee? Consuelo did not dream, after Don Tiburcio had visited Santa Fe the summer before, that he could ever again be interested in her. Yet he had sent word to Don Anabel that he was coming, and had made special

inquiry for her. She blushed with embarrassment when she thought of the outrageous manner in which she had treated Don Tiburcio; she'd slapped his face when he raised her hand and was about to implant a kiss upon it!

But then, she was only a little girl last year. Now she could appreciate what it meant to have so courtly and traveled a suitor. In a few days his pack train should arrive from Chihuahua and life would be vastly more exciting. There would be new clothes for her, too. Kid shoes—oh, she would be furious if they were not lefts and rights—brocade, perhaps some sapphire earrings. . . . It was time to dress for the afternoon. Still Consuelo lay looking idly from her mirror to the windows. Who knew at what moment one might hear the call, "The caravan is coming!" and she, with every other girl and woman in Santa Fe, would dash to window or door to gaze at the Yankee traders as they rode into town. Then there would be the delight of new goods to buy from those unknown lands beyond the rising sun, new faces to see, new thoughts to think upon.

The very thought brought Consuelo to her feet. Throwing off the ancient blue Chinese mantle brought in for her from the Orient by her father, she tried the effect of a high comb in her hair. Dipping a wide-toothed tortoise comb into

the tepid water that still stood in a heavy silver washbasin by her bed, she ran it through the dark waves till they curled crisply, with a shining order. Pulling at the sides till a few loose ringlets detached themselves, she set the comb atop the coiled mass, draped over it a white lace mantilla, and stood entranced. She would wear it to the *baile* when the caravan came.

Somehow a greater thrill lay in the advent of the lean, ruddy strangers from America than in the coming of the Spaniard's train. From the arrival of one caravan to another she could scarcely wait—the creaking wheels, the clatter of chains, the shouting and talking, the strange English tongue. She introduced herself before the mirror and smiled demurely at the imaginary gentleman she was meeting.

Then tossing comb and lace aside, she threw herself on the bed again and shouted, "Fay-lee-cita! Fay-lee-ee-cita!" It was some time before Felicita, Consuelo's peon slave, appeared; she was met by a small red shoe thrown at the door, but hitting the girl squarely as she entered the room.

"Why do you keep me waiting for my water every single day?" Consuelo was shouting; but she stopped now, a bit abashed. "How could I tell you would come this time so soon? But I

must be dressed, quick!" She had suddenly remembered that at five some young trappers would be down from Taos to talk with her father on business, and she wished to be dressed and sitting in the *patio*, from where one could see and be seen when visitors entered the *zaguan* and sat with Don Anabel in the living room.

Felicita backed out of the door and fairly ran after the water, and Consuelo began to throw clothing about the room, already disorderly, but quaint and full of charm, a curious combination of luxury and crudity. Large and high-ceiled, its adobe walls were tinted a salmon pink; the two windows, square-paned, deeply recessed by the three-foot walls, were curtained with lace, and the great carved bedstead was draped with rose-red damask hangings from Spain. On the high chest of drawers were a pair of silver candlesticks, and above hung a heavily framed mirror of old Spanish make. Before a small corner fireplace with an Indian chimney lay a thick and enormous buffalo skin, and the rough board floor was strewn with other peltries. On each side of the bed lay a tinted white Angora sheepskin. At the foot of the bed stood a high carved chest in which lay Conseulo's clothing, gowns brought over many weary hundreds of miles, packed securely on the backs of burros that wound moun-

tain passes, crossed ravines, and plodded over deserts in the long journey up from Vera Cruz, the eastern port of Mexico.

There were many shawls, black Spanish lace from Seville, a bright embroidered peasant chalis, gold and salmon flowers on a white ground, fine merinos and cashmeres of European peasant patterns. Consuelo chose now a white dress of sheer batiste, embroidered heavily in white, full-skirted, with a short plain bodice. She donned the red shoe that still lay under the bed, and when Felicita had brought her the other from the doorway, she permitted the peon woman to throw the flowered shawl over her shoulder, and stepped out into the *corredor*. Then she turned impulsively and ran back. Snatching a silk scarf from the bed, she draped it over Felicita's head.

"Here. Did I hurt your tummy? Take this."

Her mother was waiting for her in the living room. Across the table from Doña Gertrudis sat Manuel, plucking his guitar tentatively, persuasively. Not everyone in New Spain rose when a lady entered the room, but Manuel always stood when Consuelo appeared in the doorway. Her mother did not glance up from the altar-piece which she embroidered; it was the only work that her plump fingers had ever been engaged upon. Doña Gertrudis was fat, small-boned, her chin

lost in the amiable creases which had engulfed the beauty of her youth. In spite of the heat of the August day, she was dressed in the favorite black of the Mexican woman of Spanish descent. Heavy rings of yellow gold, set with garnets, roughly cut but of marvelous color, covered her fingers, a bracelet to match weighted her small wrist, and weighty gold earrings pulled down the lobes of her fat little ears. Her dress of black silk was voluminous and hung straight from her shoulders,—a fact which the shawl about her shoulders could not hide.

“And we shall have roast young pig, joint of young antelope, guinea-fowl, when Don Tiburcio arrives,” she was saying as Consuelo came in. “Manuel has a new *copleta*, Consuelo *querida*, composed specially for you, today,” she went on. Doña Gertrudis had been a famous coquette in her own time, and although the announced visit of Don Tiburcio Garcia had opened up wider vistas matrimonially for her daughter than New Spain had previously afforded, she had a family fondness for her cousin’s son and was too diplomatic to slight him.

Manuel, taking silence as assent, was already strumming, and intoning his new *copleta* in a plaintive nasal tenor. But his presence and his plinking were quite ignored by the girl, who

swished to a chair near the window and looked steadfastly out, leaving Doña Gertrudis to keep time with her foot and dream of love.

As to Don Anabel Lopez, *hidalgo*, master of the house and lord of vast lands granted to his family by the Spanish crown a century and a half before, he was not at all pleased with the prospect to which Consuelo looked forward with secret delight and anticipation. The coming of the Yankee traders across the plains with their freighted caravans of mules and covered wagons, was an event to be tolerated only for the gain it brought. Bitterly Don Anabel resented the intrusion of the hated "English" into the province conquered by Spain two centuries before.

Yet he could trade the pelts of beaver, lynx, fox, the robes of buffalo and of deer, brought in to his post by trappers white or red, at a profit that would have made Connecticut Yankees wince had they known that he himself had acquired them for a handful of tawdry merchandise, and stores that were cheaper from New Orleans and St. Louis than from Vera Cruz and Mexico City.

On this warm and sunny afternoon of late summer Don Anabel stood before the door of his store and warehouse, scowling. He could look up the little winding street to the Mountains of the Blood

of Christ, as they had been passionately and piously named by the early Conquerors, and red-streaked they were now even in the yellow light of the afternoon sun. Don Anabel looked to the passes that led north and east; he was perturbed.

"Luis," he called sharply to the young man who lounged through the doorway, a languid cigarette hanging from his lips, "I see a rider coming down the trail from Lamy. Can you see any one following? I believe it must be either an advance of the caravan arriving over the Santa Fe Trail or else the trappers I expected down from Taos, coming by the lower route.

"I only hope it is the trappers, for I would like to get their business over with before the *caravan* arrives. This Gringo trade from beyond the mountains has cut so largely into our own rightful business within the province that we must make whatever profit we can out of the goods they take back with them. The peltries they buy are cheap at the price, anyway."

"What is the Governor charging them a load this year?" asked Luis, who was rather a handsome young fellow of eighteen or twenty, with a straight nose and loose, full lips.

"Just what was charged two years ago when the first *caravana* of wagons entered the territory

—five hundred dollars each wagon-load; and, Santa Maria! it is little enough.”

“Little indeed,” assented Luis, indifferently. “When does the excellent Don Tiburcio arrive? Have we been taming the little sister so that she won’t scratch this time?”

“I expect Don Tiburcio at any time now. That may be the dust of his caravan. He is bringing camlet cloth and silken gingham, shawls, combs, white sugar, ammunition, the usual merchandise. And Heaven send he arrive before the Americans with their cargo from the United States, and have his goods disposed of.”

“And my linen shirts?” Luis inquired with more animation than he had yet shown. He followed his father back into the storeroom.

Don Anabel nodded, a trifle annoyed. “I believe he brings linen. But with the four frilled camisas which I gave you at Easter-time you should have no urgent need for more shirts at present. By the way, you do not wear the ruby ring which your parents gave you at Christmas.” He eyed his son keenly. Luis flicked an ash from his cigarette and replied, evenly: “Not all the time. It is a trifle large, and much too fine a stone to run the risk of losing.”

“So I thought when it was presented to you,” remarked Don Anabel, drily. “How does it hap-

pen, then, that I find it on the finger of the gaming friar of Albuquerque ——?”

Luis flushed. He did not reply, but looked away in embarrassment.

“The usual thing? Tell me no lies, Luis.”

“I exacted the promise that I might redeem it, and expect to do so very shortly now.”

“Well, I trust that you will. But not from the *fray*. Come to me when you are ready.” Don Anabel drew his hand from his pocket and, opening it palm upward, showed a splendid garnet ring, set in dull heavy gold. “It has cost me three hundred duros to get back your pledge, several times the amount of your losses; but it is too fine a gem to have imported but to lose.”

His words were cut short by a commotion outside in the streets, and shouts coming down the canyon road.

“They are coming! They are coming!” shouted ragged children capering in the roadway.

“Who comes? Who comes?” the cry went up from doorway and street. People poured out into plaza and lane, siestas abandoned for so great an occasion.

“A caravan, from Mexico.” A rider came galloping down the street and drew up in a cloud of dust before Don Anabel’s warehouse. He leaped from the sweating horse, bowed low before Don

Anabel, and spoke, "Don Tiburcio Garcia follows on the trail, and his *caravana* is but a short distance behind him."

Hastily Don Anabel sent a messenger to his house with the news, but already it had traveled ahead, and as the entire establishment had known for days just what was to be done for the guest from the capital, all was immediately thrown into a fury of activity. The great open square in the center of the Villa became suddenly alive, the loungers before the palace of the Governor all hurried up the street; blanketed Indians from the pueblos followed in leisurely dignity; girls and women flocked to windows and doors; and shouting filled the air.

"Here comes the cavalier from Mexico. The cavalcade of Don Tiburcio de Garcia is arriving."

Now that the moment was at hand, Doña Gertrudis flew out of her customary placidity like a nervous ground bird fluttering about its nest. She toddled hither and thither on her ridiculous little feet, scolding, all but weeping; she smelled the distilling coffee, threw up her hands, shrieking. "What miserable *café*! Tepid water!" The beverage was in reality almost a pure caffein that had distilled and dripped for two hours, a potent drug.

"And make the chocolate thick, do you hear,

Concha? Three eggs in it—three—and beaten a half-hour.” Concha knew well how to make the chocolate, the favorite drink of Spaniard, and of ancient Aztec before him. It was her special province to make it, rich, thick, sweet, beaten like a mousse. Doña Gertrudis tasted the red-hot chili, ordered the house servants this way and that. The corral behind the kitchen was filled with the squawking of unfortunate fowls being chased to their destiny—*arroz con pollo* (chicken with rice).

Having thoroughly demoralized the slow but eventually sure processes of Lupe, the cook, Doña Gertrudis bustled into her bedchamber to put on more jewels and daub a fine white flour over her cheeks and neck, while she chattered like a parakeet through the doors to Consuelo, who had abandoned Manuel for her mirror.

When the mirror had told her that the necklace of tawny topaz was prettier with white than was the opal chain, she lingered till the sound of horses and a company of men so excited her curiosity that she had to pull back the *persianas* and peer out. Herded by the shouts of the *arrieros*, a caravan of a hundred mules and burros was being crowded into the plaza. Had they brought her new satin shoes and brocaded skirt? There was Don Tiburcio! In the high hat, a

wrought leather jerkin over a gold-embroidered vest, a wide copper-studded belt, and as he dismounted a bit stiffly from his lathered horse Consuelo took note of beautiful tight-fitting trousers, fawn-colored, over which were riding leggings of Mexican leather. All this in a flash, then Consuelo's eyes swept to the travel-worn face of the southern Don.

A true son of the Conquerors of the New World was Don Tiburcio de Garcia y Mendoza. A dark, lean man of thirty, who looked ten years older, he was tall, and hatchet-jawed, with a nose of perfect aquilinity, and a thin mouth made somewhat prominent by large even teeth. The mouth seemed harsh, cruel even, till it broke into a smile. His brow was high and narrow, and his well-cut ears lay close to his aristocratic head. Don Tiburcio was filled with the adventurous spirit of his forbears or he would not himself come trading at the head of his caravans up the Cordilleras from Mexico, enduring every sort of physical hardship and running the gantlet of fiercely treacherous Indian tribes.

His father, Don Diego Alvar Roybal de Garcia, never left his broad estates in Guadelajara, not even to travel north to the immense cattle ranches of the Garcias in Chihuahua. The supervision of all that he left to his son, and as the

caravan journeys to the north proved highly gainful, he made no objection to them. Romance called to the young man. The lure that first brought the Spanish Conquistadores up through this country had drawn him—gold and gain, perhaps undiscovered treasure waiting there—and, indeed, at the end he had found beauty, too. Nowhere in the southern provinces had Don Tiburcio seen a face to compare in his estimation with that of the little hoyden who had slapped him the summer before. And to speak truthfully, it was the conquest of that untamed child which had lured him back this time over the hot stretches of desert between Santa Fe and Chihuahua as urgently as the money to be gained in trade.

Night had fallen before arrangements for the caravan had been disposed of and the weary pack animals relieved of their cargo. Don Tiburcio refreshed himself and removed the stains of travel, making ready to present himself in the candle-lit *sala* of Don Anabel's house and to meet the ladies. He made a fine figure in his velvet short jacket, his silver-buttoned breeches, and a pair of excellent boots with inch heels. He was taller than either his host or Luis, both of whom wore their best heeled boots also, and their finest shirts of frilled white linen, their handsomest serapes and sashes, brought from Mexico the year

before. Father and son stood until their guest had seated himself in a heavy low chair. A slippered servant brought small silver goblets and a pitcher, and Don Anabel poured a fragrant drink. "My peach brandy, señor," he offered. "*Saludes* [Your good health]! It seems to me that it has an exceptional flavor. The peaches are from the Valley of the Rio Grande."

The visitor from Mexico sipped critically and settled down with the appreciation of the connoisseur. "It is quite perfect, señor. And well I remember the most excellent grape of last year."

"You shall taste of a still older vintage at supper, Don Tiburcio."

"And is not that the *indiana* we brought you last year?" Don Tiburcio nodded at the red calico tacked shoulder high about the whitewashed walls to protect the backs of those who sat around the room. The simple hangings looked, in the glimmer of yellow candle-light, like a rich tapestry, a proper setting for the heavy, brass-studded chairs, for the florid oak table, the massive candlesticks. The rough floors were covered with buffalo robes and with rich Mexican shawls, serapes, and serapes also draped the sofas at each side of the room. On the wall above the mantle of the low fireplace hung a painting, dark and old and cracked and priceless. Don Anabel prized it

above all his possessions, claiming it was a Murillo; and because of his affection for the painting, which he related had been brought over a century and a half before, his family also venerated the canvas. It was a Madonna and Child, with cherubim. Don Tiburcio looked for and found the painting.

"Two possessions of yours I would like to take away with me, Don Anabel," the Mexican visitor said with that air of courteous compliment of the grandee.

"*Mi casa es suya, señor* [My house is yours]," Don Anabel was repeating the formal phrase of Spanish hospitality.

"This painting is one," Don Tiburcio continued, knowing well that it was almost the last thing in the world that Don Anabel would part with, "and the other ——" His words remained unspoken, for at this moment the ladies entered the *sala*, Doña Gertrudis first, billowing in importantly, glowing with rose garnets and pearls. Consuelo followed demurely, decorously, with lowered eyes, yet inclining her head to Don Tiburcio's bow. Within her bodice her heart was beating furiously, but from the tail of her eyes she watched the distinguished visitor.

"It is a great pleasure to see you once again, señora, and you, señorita. Your servant."

"Igualmente, igualmente [Equally, equally], señor!"

"And now let us sup." Don Anabel led the way toward the dining room, which was at the rear of the house, near the kitchen. They passed through the entrance hall, out into the patio, and crossed to the other side. Don Anabel's house, like all large Mexican houses, was a square built about an inner court, into which most of the rooms opened. Into a long cozy room they stepped, where dining and serving tables were heaped with the efforts of the good Lupe. Every dish was of purest silver, plate and goblet, bowl and salver; candle-light; linens of finest drawn-work; a young roast pig served whole on a massive platter; chicken and rice flanked with squash; stewed corn; melon cooled in the fountain; wines from the grapes of the Tesuque Valley near Santa Fe; pickled watermelon; apricot pastries. It was a scene of mediæval plenty. The guest tasted everything, to Doña Gertrudis's satisfaction, and ate well, slowly, savoring the feast after the rough fare enforced during the long journey up into the province.

"I am reminded," he addressed Doña Gertrudis, "that I captured far to the south of here, señora, a number of young *javalinas* [peccary], and I have brought one alive for you. I think you will

like the flavor, for it is even more delicate, if possible, than the shoat here."

Thus the talk turned to his voyage. The Indians to the south, while not on the warpath, were far from being peaceful. Acoma, that strange Indian pueblo perched upon the high rock, held a deadly hatred for all Spaniards, the visitor said, and there were, southward a few days' travel, bands of plains Indians that strayed over from eastward, who were more fierce than any he had yet seen. But the country was rich and fertile. Corn he had seen fourteen feet high; peaches that would not enter a pint cup; and beaver enough to line all the capes of all the crowned heads in Europe. He held the company enthralled with brave tales of many perilous escapes upon this journey, and strange sights that he had seen in the desert.

When he had left the northern part of Chihuahua behind and was looking for the Valley of the Rio Grande he had somehow missed it, his scout not having recognized the river bed, in that season bone dry, and he had gone some miles to the east, following up a strange spur of mountains which resembled the carven spires of a church or the colored pipes of a great church organ. Not finding a pass over this rocky spur which lay between him and the river valley, he

and his caravan had kept along the foot of it, going northward for perhaps sixty *leguas*. Then they had come upon the strangest sight that ever it had been his lot to behold in the desert country. At first Don Tiburcio related he had thought he was seeing a mirage; it seemed to him he saw snow. As he went nearer and nearer, and snow it still remained, he doubted but that he must be mad. Yet when they had reached the place there rose before them a great hill of dazzling white stuff which had the brilliance of snow in sunshine, and which the light desert breeze blew off in a fine white mist. And this curious salt, for such he deemed it to be, drifted in waves, and whatever was lost in it was nevermore found—so the Indians whom he had encountered above the spot had told him. And in those mountains which he had skirted was silver, aye, and even gold, so vowed a Pueblo Indian from the place called Isleta!

“And you did not remain there to discover whether or not it were so, señor?” inquired Luis, aghast.

“Ah no! We were weary, and the animals needing water, and there would be gold aplenty—and other matters more important at my journey’s end.” Don Tiburcio replied, suavely, and looked directly at Consuelo.

Flushed with excitement, she flashed and sparkled now, plying the Don with eager questions about his trip. And so the evening passed, and when she lay upon her pillow late that night Consuelo wondered if with that lean, fascinating *caballero* lay her future and her fate. Impersonally she dreamed, stirred from the monotony against which she had been rebelling; but somehow her fancies were not real to her, no pictures of the future arose to her sleepy brain. Yet as she slipped into a dreamless slumber that future was shaping, moving toward her as rapidly as the lumbering feet of oxen could move.



Chapter II

STEVEN MERCER

THE city of New Orleans, even after the French sold it to the United States, remained a place of gilt-braided social life, where the brilliant creole "quality" held bright levees. It was, too, a port of intrigue and of commerce that swirled about the wharves and up and down the great Mississippi.

Had the society that frequented his mother's drawing-room in the lovely old French city not been so brilliant, the ladies so entertaining, the gentlemen so distinguished, Steven Mercer would have rebelled quite openly against a life that seemed to him mainly frills and lace. He was happier on the river than anywhere. For one reason only would Steven stay at home, his keeled boat moored idly at a delta wharf: to hear epauletted gentlemen recount the thrills of the War of 1812; to listen spellbound while naval celebrities who had been with Decatur told of

that immemorial engagement in the Tripolitan harbor. That had been in the year of Steven's birth. It was a bitter disappointment to a boy of seventeen to reflect that those days were over.

"Steven prefers combat," his mother lamented; "now that there are no more wars, he wants to run away to sea, to trade, I am sure!" She was always afraid of this vulgar reversion.

"Why not?" Hamilton Mercer would reply to his wife. "Steven is a man grown. This country is new. It breeds men." He looked with pride on his son's six feet, on the breadth of him. When Steven was twenty-one he would take him into the business of Mercer & Co., the largest mercantile importing house in Louisiana. Let him do as he wished until then, aside from his studies.

But his gay little French *maman* made many demands upon Steven. She was exacting as to his manners, but for the rest did not trouble about whether he roamed the plantation or studied his Greek. As a child she had been content to turn him over to his governess or his tutors. Now that he had grown into a tall, muscular youth, and a handsome one, he must attend her levees, escort her at times. And although Steven admired his mother very much and had been brought up to the life, it must be confessed that he preferred

his father's wharves to his mother's drawing-room.

Quick enough at goods and figures, still he went less often to the offices of Mercer & Co. than to the riverside. Yet trade was already claiming him for her own, to tread in the footsteps of his paternal ancestors—ship captains, merchants, and merchant owners of good vessels all—whose blood stirred restlessly in his veins, calling him to new markets and to adventure.

Down on the wharves, where vessels from strange ports were putting in with their merchandise for the warehouses of Mercer & Co., that was where Steven had always loved to be. Where the negroes talked in their own river talk, and fought the English-speaking blacks of the West Indies. Where one could talk in villainous Portuguese with equally villainous-looking, ear-ringed sailors, with salty first mates from Lisbon, Calcutta, Hong-Kong, Liverpool. Across the Gulf to Mexican ports went their cargoes, and up the river to that wide inner country searched by the sinuous fingers of the great Mississippi, the Father of Waters.

Scarcely a quarter of a century had passed since Napoleon had sold to the United States "Louisiana," the French territory stretching from the Mississippi westward to the Rockies,

and from the Gulf of Mexico northward to Canada; a buffer against the British which Napoleon himself could not hold and sold for a song. France had counted on Spain's keeping the American colonists out of the West, and had secretly ceded her vast territory to the Spanish crown, but British traders from Montreal dispatched their bateaux down the Mississippi and up the Des Moines and Arkansas Rivers, undisturbed by the Spanish galleys sent against them. Spain abandoned the land she could not hold.

She thrust it back upon France, busy with the wars that Napoleon provided for her at home. Hence New Orleans became an American port. The mouths of the mighty Mississippi were no longer closed to the ships of the United States. The inland empire which the great stream watered, bottled up no longer by the Spanish and French, was filling rapidly with the land-hungry settlers of the new United States. It was less than fifty years since the Revolutionary War, and yet already the thirteen original Colonies had expanded across the Alleghanies, west to the Mississippi. Even under French occupation there had been more Americans in St. Louis than French.

At New Orleans docks bale after bale of goods from New York or from Charleston, from Massa-

chusetts or from New Jersey, was shifted to the new keeled boats of the river. Up the Mississippi to St. Louis and beyond they went, branching off upon the Arkansas to push into the west. And down the river, borne with the incredible speed of that mighty current, came the flat-bottomed bateaux, laden with pack after pack of lustrous furs.

"Where are they going?" Steven always asked the river captains as he watched the new boats, that went by steam, loading for the upstream voyage. "To the Oklahoma fur-traders at Fort Gibson, to Leavenworth for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company," or, "For the Indians, for New Spain."

Fascinated by the broad bosom of the river as he was, Steven was a dozen times on the verge of running away up the Mississippi to see for himself the tribes of Indians living a wild free life on the plains. Something always happened to prevent. His mother had had a *fête champêtre* at their country place at Pas Christian the last time he was so tempted. That was when he was thirteen; and the country beyond still remained a mystery.

Persons of interest and importance came sometimes to the offices of Hamilton Mercer as well as to the *soirées* of Madame Mercer. And on the

day that Steven arrived at seventeen, and at a restlessness that could no longer be endured, two such were destined to present themselves at the merchant's establishment. Hamilton Mercer had gone up the river to Pas Christian to oversee his plantations, and Steven was attending to some minor matters of business.

He found conversing with Mr. Morley, his father's chief clerk, a dark-bearded Frenchman in the habit of the *voyageurs* who came down the river at the helms of their fur-laden bateaux. The man's appearance and dress fascinated Steven. He waited around until Monsieur Delmar was presented to him. The Frenchman represented a group of Western traders and was arranging for a large shipment of merchandise of a commoner sort than that usually handled by Mercer and Co.

It was for the far Western trade, he said, in Mexican territory. The customer told of the commerce that had grown up during the past four years with New Spain, that province of Mexico; a vast, far territory, lying a good five months' travel away, beyond the Rocky Mountains. Great caravans were crossing the continent every six months, he said, carrying thousands of dollars' worth of merchandise into New Mexico, to the Villa de Santa Fe. Last year the

government had built a new fort way up above St. Louis, upon the Missouri River, just to protect the people from the Indians.

The route to the West lay from this Fort Leavenworth in the Kansas country, to Santa Fe in Mexico—a three months' journey, more or less.

"So soon as this goods I buy now reach the place from which they start," Monsieur Delmar explained, "the caravan will set out. Many wagon, maybe twenty, thirty, forty—and mules. A big train, so to be safe against those Indian who fight across the plain.

"This year my fr'en', Colonel St. Vrain," he told them, "build with the brothers Bent a large fort and trade station in that Mexican country, on the River Arkansas; safety is there for *les voyageurs*."

The Frenchman was eager to be on the return. He had come down the river from St. Louis at the rate of from fifty to a hundred miles a day, borne on the bosom of powerful currents, but it would take longer than usual to ascend the river, swollen as it was with the melting snow and rain.

Under the fire of Steven's eager questions the Frenchman expanded on his theme. It was the tale of the Trail that he told—the Santa Fe Trail that watered with blood the growth of an empire

to the west. Attacked by savage red men on the long overland journey, oftentimes at the end of the Trail thrown into prison by hostile Spanish governors, still they came, trader and trapper. "Some day, by Gar! we see who own that land."

Steven sat entranced while his carriage and horses waited below. This was better than stories of the past; it was going on right now. This was adventure, a life for men. This was a conquest that lured him. He knew then that he must ask his father to send him with a shipment of goods across the plains.

"Could I join the caravan that will leave this spring?" The request came almost before he realized it.

"Pourquoi pas?" Monsieur Delmar would give the boy a letter to Colonel St. Vrain. The colonel would take him in his train without doubt. The Frenchman was leaving New Orleans at once, the following morning, and the letter was therefore written upon the spot, and Monsieur Delmar took his departure. With the missive thrust into his pocket Steven prepared to leave the offices and return home to wait his father's arrival. They would talk the project over.

As he donned the tall hat of the dandy of the day, Mr. Morley rapped, ushering into the room a gentleman who wore a wide hat pulled down

over his eyes. A dark cloak thrown over his shoulder was held across the lower part of his face in spite of the warmth of the day.

"You will see the gentleman?" inquired the courteous Morley.

The visitor waited until the door closed behind the clerk, and then, without removing his hat or releasing his hold on the cloak clutched beneath his chin, took the chair Steven proffered.

"Señor," he began in Spanish, "I expected to see a grown man, pardon, and you are but a youth."

"You are looking for my father, sir," Steven replied. "I am Steven Mercer, *a sus ordenes*, at your service," for Steven spoke Spanish as well as French. He bowed. "May I not serve you in my father's place?"

At this the visitor removed his hat, threw back his cloak, revealing a long dark face with an extremely high forehead. "Señor," he repeated, "I am Gomez Pedraza, recently elected President of the Republic of Mexico"—Steven gasped and rose to his feet—"and still more recently abdicated. I am fleeing to England because military force and the machinations of my opponent have forced me from the position to which I was rightfully elected. I have but a short time here in New Orleans, and, to be brief, I have a favor to ask

of your father. I have been assured by faithful friends that he is a man of the utmost probity, and"—he eyed Steven keenly—"I am inclined to believe that one may repose the same confidence in the son."

Curiously affected by the statement of Señor Pedraza, Steven was actually trembling as he replied, "Señor, I will try to serve you as my father would were he here, and I beg of you to tell me in what way that may be."

"I wished to learn," replied the visitor, "whether your father is engaged in an expedition of trade to our northern province of New Mexico. There is an overland route from this country, the Santa Fe Trail—you may have heard of it—over which much goods are being carried to our northern territories. Has Señor Mercer dealings with any trader in whom he has implicit trust—one who is trading with New Mexico?"

"My father himself does not send goods to the West," Steven replied, "but he sells to the merchants engaged in trade on the prairies and at the fur-trading stations. Just today he has supplied enough for several loads to a buyer for the traders to New Spain."

"Do not say New Spain," interposed Señor Pedraza. "The province is New Mexico. But, alas! Mexico is less independent since she threw

off the yoke of Spain but six years ago than she had been for two hundred years under the Spanish vice-regents. To return to my mission, however—is there, then, no chance of your father sending any of his own men over the plains? For I have a mission that I would intrust to him.”

“Yes,” answered Steven, boldly and without a moment’s hesitation. “I myself am going to take the trip. I shall probably travel with the caravan of one of the great traders of the plains.”

“Then”—the deposed President of the troubled country across the Gulf leaned impressively nearer the young man—“then, Señor, will you accept the mission? Will you carry a dispatch for me to one whom you will encounter at Santa Fe? When he will arrive I do not know—some-time within the next few months—but the message must be delivered *into his hands*. His name is upon the inner envelope, which you will discover upon your arrival. It is a matter of great moment to Mexico.”

“I will do it, señor.” With the impulsiveness of youth Steven rose, accepting with no further ado a mission of apparently grave importance. The two clasped hands.

“When will you be leaving?” Pedraza lowered his voice.

“As soon as may be señor. It will take time to

make all arrangements, but the caravan leaves, so monsieur tells me, sometime in the spring, and as it is now January I shall have to make haste." As the words fell from his lips Steven felt an inner exultation, coupled with amazement, that this could indeed be he. To take upon himself such a decision, without so much as consulting his parents, without obtaining his father's permission! Why, he didn't even know whether he could have any merchandise! But the desire of youth overruled any other consideration. 33842

The deposed President of Mexico drew close to the boy. "Señor, you are young." He spoke in a low voice. "But I have the confidence in you. Some day I shall be returning to Mexico; then, you may be sure, the interests of the American traders from New Orleans shall not be slighted. Señor, *adios!*" He thrust a sealed letter into Steven's hands and, once more muffling his face, opened the door before which an attendant awaited him, and took his departure. CO. SCHOOL

Steven stood before the closed door, his blood singing in his veins, the packet already hidden in an inner pocket. There was no doubt about it now. He was cast for adventure. It was as good as done. He hurried home to the birthday festivities in his honor, and many an older soldier of fortune that night envied his youth, his

shining face, seeing in him the potentialities of fresh achievement.

"And as to your brave days of eighteen twelve," cried Steven to the toast of the gilt-braided officer, "we are living in brave days. There is plenty of work for a man of mettle today, too ——" He caught himself, lest some word escape him. The evening passed at length. Steven lingered in his father's study.

The thing must be talked over. All Steve's instinct was to pack his luggage and depart; but he was too well brought up, too faithful, seriously to consider such a course. Of course, his mother would say no. His father would have to be relied upon to win her over. But to win his father's consent. Out with the question! that was the only way.

"Would you consider, sir, sending a wagon of your own for the trade upon the Western prairies?" he began, most business-like.

Hamilton Mercer considered. "Why, no, Steve, I've never leaned toward making any investment there," he replied, slowly. "The hazards are too great. And although the rewards are said to be fabulous, I know personally no one whom I would intrust with the handling of several thousands of dollars' worth of investment."

"How about myself?" Steven looked straight at his father, meeting his eyes coolly enough, albeit with a rising color and a pounding heart. Mr. Mercer rose in astonishment; he considered some moments before replying.

"Steven, no, my son. I do not think that you are prepared for the hardships, the enmities, the dangers, of such pioneer enterprises. I could not say that I would outfit a caravan for you."

"Very well, sir." Steven took the rebuff quietly, hiding his acute disappointment. "But a man must know life sometime." That was all there was to the conversation. Two days later Hamilton Mercer found a note upon his study table. "I have gone, father, to join the caravans leaving from Independence. Tell *maman* not to have any worries about me." And so Steven Mercer had run away, not to sea, but to follow in the wake of the prairie schooner.

Nearly three months later a tall youth, with reddish-blond hair, a straight nose still peeling under the blistering rays of the river sun, deep-set blue eyes, and an enviable burn, stepped off a river boat at Westport Landing. He carried two heavy bags, while a small darky struggled after him with another. Steven had been fortunate in catching the American Fur Company's steamer

which was plying the river between New Orleans and St. Louis.

Arriving at St. Louis, he had had to disembark and continue his trip by bateau. The freight destined for Fort Leavenworth and for Independence had been loaded aboard the flat-bottomed river boats, and the slow pull upstream begun. Steven had learned, on the afternoon after his conversation with his father, that at midnight that night one of the Astor Company's steamers would start up the Mississippi, laden with provisions. He determined at once to take it. There remained but a few hours before it left and his preparations had been hurried and stealthy, of necessity. He had thrust into two bags all the clothes that they would contain and into the other such of his personal treasures as it seemed to him he might need: books, a brace of rather ancient pistols, a hunting-knife, a set of chessmen and a board. And so here he was, for once eager to leap ashore, and the next thing to find Colonel Ceran St. Vrain and the caravan he expected to join.

Independence! the spot from which the westward-moving train was to set out. How was he to reach the place? He hung around the landing, watching the bales of goods unloaded from one bateau after another, looking for some one who might be going his way. A trapper in buckskins

and beaded moccasins yelled profanely and ardently as the oarsmen battled against the current and struggled for a safe landing. Not far away stood his mules, waiting for their loads.

"Independence?" nodded the half-breed. "You ride over with me, Pierre Lafitte. Sure, you ride my white mule, Céleste." Buy a horse at Independence. No time to stop now or they would miss the caravan, if they had not already done so. Pierre had but a small amount of cargo, and soon they were trotting through the streets of the new settlement, a little place of frame houses at the juncture of the Missouri River with the Kansas, later to be known as Kansas City. It was only about eight miles to Independence, and as the trapper pushed straight ahead they would reach it in an hour or so.

"Why do you think we might miss the caravan?" asked Steven, his heart sinking at the thought. "I thought it would not leave till May or June." It would be a fearful disappointment, a disaster, to fail to connect with the caravan, he felt. It might be six months before another would be leaving for Santa Fe, and he would have the opportunity to cross the plains to that mysterious country of New Spain. He felt for the stiffly folded packet which he carried always beneath his vest, the missive given him by President

Pedraza. The sense of importance and responsibility which it gave him was at times almost too weighty. What was this mission of national import which he had engaged himself to perform? This thought was running through his head now.

"One caravan have already leave," said Pierre in reply to Steven's question. "The Indian are very bad this year. Ute, Pawnee, Cree, Comanche, no like the way white men shoot back."

Pierre's tongue had been loosened by several pulls from a flask, and as they jogged briskly along he unburdened himself with talk of the trade, of the American Fur Company and its nefarious ways. "Bribe the Indian with weesky," he said, "an bad weesky at that." You never knew what you would get for your furs; lots of trappers frozen out by changed prices. Supplies so high; six dollar for an ax, five dollar for an iron kettle. Sometimes your winter's catch lost or stolen. The Rocky Mountain Fur Company just as bad. That General Ashley of St. Louis, belonging to the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, had stolen a cache of furs up north, planted by Skeen Ogden of Hudson Bay Company, just because he himself have bad luck. In four years Ashley had grown very rich, and sold out to Smith and Sublette of St. Louis.

Pierre was depressed. After ten years' trap-

ping he was only \$550 ahead, and he'd had to come way down from the Colorado River to collect what was due him at St. Louis. The trader who staked him with supplies had tried to cheat on him, and had sent Indians after him on the Trail to kill him before he could get down to St. Louis and get his account straightened out with the company itself. He'd gotten off with his life, but not much else. It was a hard trade. But he wanted to get away from this civilization and be back on the upper Colorado.

Having unburdened his soul, the trapper relapsed into a taciturn silence, and it was so that they completed the journey, jogging into the little town of Independence, where before the big general store and hotel they saw at once that a caravan was making ready. Steve drew a breath of relief, and the suspense which he had felt let down.

"There is Colonel St. Vrain," and Pierre pointed out a stocky figure in the fustian suit of the townsman of the period, and a broad Mexican hat. A few minutes later Steven stood before him, a heavy-set man with wide, pleasant face.

"Colonel St. Vrain?" The colonel looked up to see a burned young man of twenty-two or three, he judged (so much had three months on the

river done for him), who towered head and shoulders over himself, and took an instant liking to "Steven Mercer of New Orleans, at your service monsieur." Busy as he was—the *arrieros* were loading the mules with their packs, and everywhere wagons were being charged with their cargo—the colonel stopped to listen to Steven's request and to read the letter of introduction, upon which he again shook hands with Steven.

"But certainly, my lad, if you wish to cross the Trail with us you are welcome. And welcome you surely are, for another few hours and we should have left. We have waited here six weeks for this merchandise while William Bent, my partner, went ahead with the other caravan, escorted by Major Riley from Fort Leavenworth, and three companies of soldiers. We shall sleep on the prairies tonight, so make haste. But," and the colonel eyed Steven keenly, "I see you bring no equipment, no merchandise?"

Steven reddened beneath his burn. "No, monsieur, my father is not yet convinced of the possibilities of trade westward to Santa Fe ——"

St. Vrain nodded energetically, not displeased, perhaps, at that. "Are you driver, guide, trapper? *Non!* You are not. I pay you no wages,

but all who are of the caravan must do what they can to make themselves useful, *n'est-ce pas?*”

“Oh, I shall pay my own expenses, *mi coronel*,” protested Steven. The hospitable but practical St. Vrain was at this moment called away to supervise a wagon-load and Steven was led off to the store by Pierre to pick out his outfit. They opened Steve’s luggage to take stock of what he had. Three flannel shirts of the kind that the river men down on the Mississippi wore, some heavy socks, that was all of a frontiersman’s outfit that his bags yielded. He closed them quickly, a bit ashamed to have the guide see the fine linen underthings, the starched shirts, an extra suit of fustian, and one of silk, also a pair of smartly turned city boots.

“I can leave these bags here,” he said, and was all for discarding them grandly.

“But, no,” cautioned Pierre. “Take them with you. If you do not wish to wear the clothes, you can sell them out there. The Mexicans will buy everything.”

Steven emerged from the store transformed, wearing Mexican leather breeches open from the knee down, plainsman’s boots, and a shirt shipped from his father’s warehouse. It had taken the whole of his month’s allowance to outfit himself—gun, ammunition, his rations of beans, salt

pork, coffee, and flour, which were added to the general commissary of the colonel's outfit. He deposited \$200 in all with the storekeeper, and his remaining \$300 Steven tied tightly in a leather pouch and hung it inside his shirt.

With his grips and new outfit he reported back to the colonel, was assigned a seat in the wagon following the colonel's own, second in the caravan, and took his stand at one side while he watched the preparations for departure, hoping to be called upon to do something, ready to jump for such service.

Here were swarthy Mexicans, whom the boy from New Orleans recognized, as he had talked with many off the ships from Vera Cruz, swearing and sweating as they made ready the mule pack train which would make up half of the caravan. A *mula de carga* was brought up to where the cargo lay upon the ground, the sheepskin pad and saddle-cloth thrown upon its back, the *aparejo*, the hay-stuffed saddle of leather which protected the animal's back from the cargo, set on top, and cinched with a wide grass bandage as tightly as the shouting, straining *arriero* could draw it, while the mule groaned and grunted. It seemed to Steven raw cruelty, but he kept his own counsel, watching one animal after another saddled in this way, swiftly, expertly. The *cargador* and

his assistant, using their knees as levers, deftly heaved the heavy bales of goods up on to the mules' backs, lashing them firmly with a stout rope passed under the belly of the animal, while a vicious-looking crupper passed beneath their scarred and lacerated tails further served to hold the whole tight. In five minutes a mule was loaded. "*Adios*," shouted the *cargador*, slapping the animal on the rump. "Good-by." The assistant would sing out, "*Vaya* [Go]." "*Anda* [Walk]," the *cargador* would answer, upon which the animal would trot off to feed until the rest of the train was ready.

There were thirty wagons in this caravan, drawn by mules, with the exception of two belonging to the colonel, which would carry three tons of goods each, twice as much as the others, and which were each drawn by twelve oxen. This was something new on the Trail and the colonel was most particular to see how the oxen served. The remaining six wagons belonging to St. Vrain carried one and a half tons each and were drawn by eight mules. The rest of the caravan was made up of eight-mule wagons and the mule train, with thirty or forty extra mules and horses that would bring up the rear of the caravan, as usual.

The colonel had been chosen captain of the

traders, and his word would be law on the voyage across the plains. He rode back and forth now, directing the loading of his own wagons and superintending the work of all. Steve's bags were packed under the seat of the wagon in which he was to ride. The caravan was falling into line before he realized it. No time to lose; the train had waited as long as it dared for the goods from New Orleans, and, now they were ready, they would go.

"All's set," was heard from one teamster after another.

"Stretch out," shouted the *mayordomo* (who was next in command) as the muleteers ran along, cracking their whips and driving the grazing mules into line. "Catch up! Ca-aatch up!"

The driver of Steve's wagon leaped to his seat, curled the whip over the backs of his eight mules, yelling and gee-hawing at them; there was a great shouting all down the line, an answering accolade from the populace of Independence which had all gathered in the square to watch the departure, and they were off, to the jingle of chains, the rattle of yokes, the yee-hawing of balky mules, rolling down the incline that led away westward, with a flourish and a bravery, right into the setting sun.



Chapter III

DISPUTED EMPIRE

TO SANTA FE, seven hundred and fifty miles ahead—with but one white settlement in all the distance—lumbered the caravan. There were fifteen wagons, fifty men, and more than three times that many animals. Before them stretched the undulating prairies, waving with deep grass; behind wound the tail of the caravan. Above, the skies were richly blue, gorgeous with vast white clouds.

Four nights on the plains, under the stars, listening about the camp fire to talk of trader and trapper. Steven was filled with tales of the Trail, and of the fortunes that lay already mined and minted over the far mountains—theirs for the journeying after. Seated now in the lead wagon beside St. Vrain, Steven wondered if in all that vast wilderness of land there could be other living beings than the fifty men and near two hundred animals of their caravan.

"Ha! you think not," said the Frenchman, chatting now in French, now in English. "In this land"—he swept his hand about the horizon—"live many great nations of red men—Kaw, Kansas, Pawnee, Arapahoe, Kiowa, Comanche, Apache, Cheyenne. Many tribes, two to ten thousand strong." It was the fur-traders, St. Vrain remarked with pride, who had taught the Indians to need white men's goods—calico, whisky, looking-glasses, and gunpowder.

"Not so many people in Santa Fe," said St. Vrain, "just about two thousand souls, but, *mon Dieu!* there were near fifty thousand in the state, all told—Mexicans and Pueblo Indians—and that was worth risking something for. The Spaniards had been shipping everything but the foodstuffs of the land up from Mexico for almost three hundred years. And they have further to come than we. What could be easier than this?"

"It is wonderful," Steven agreed, "yet I wonder if those new steam-driven engines which they ran on a track in Maryland last winter will not be crossing this plain some day. Think, they could pull all this freight without any effort at all."

"I doubt if ever," St. Vrain shook his head skeptically. "They could *never* lay the track, and could make but little better time. We've come fast. We'll be nooning at One-hundred-and-ten-

mile creek. Day before yesterday I showed you where the Oregon Trail branched off; now the way lies straight ahead till we strike the Arkansas at the Bend. Your Senator Benton, and President Monroe, too, have been good friends to the traders, getting the old Trail surveyed. This is the way lad, that the first fellows who found that country yonder traveled. They followed the sunset, the Spaniards, till they struck a river flowing from the west, the Arkansas. And that's the way the first traders, La Lande and Pursley, came twenty-five years ago; they're still living in Santa Fe, doing business. And Captain Pike, exploring for the United States—I'll show you a great peak named after him when we reach the mountains. But poor Pike got onto Mexican territory and built him a winter fort, thinking it was the United States, and they threw him into prison in Santa Fe as a spy. Lots of those who came after him met the same fate; and since they blazed the way many traders have come.

"I've heard it said out yonder"—the colonel nodded towards the sunset—"that those early Spaniards thought they were going to find cities with streets paved with gold! Seven of them!" The fat Frenchman threw back his head and laughed appreciatively. "But the gold is in the pocket, not in the street; and it's *silver*, bar and

bullion and minted coin." He slapped his thigh, roaring heartily. "That is what the trader finds in honest trade where the Spaniard failed with all his bloodshed. Yet do you know, they hate us like pizen! Many a man who found his way across this trackless plain and through the mountain passes wasn't able to find his way back. Rotted in Mexican jails like McKnight and his party back in 1812, that lay for ten years in Chihuahua carcels, their goods confiscate; *mais oui!*"

"How did this Pursley happen to be allowed to live in Santa Fe unmolested?" asked Steven, curiously, a trifle uneasy at such a record.

"They wouldn't let him leave. He knows where free gold lies thick in those mountains," the colonel replied. "He won't tell where and they wouldn't let him get away. They always hope to find out where. Some day he may tell and there'll be a trail broader than this worn to the diggings, mark me."

The colonel flecked the backs of his oxen to speed their measured pacing. "My countree she give up an empire here," he said at length in English. "Two hundred year she been here, up and down the Mississip. England push down from the Great Lakes, from the Hudson Bay, but she can't push the *voyageur* off the rivers and *lacs*. Those Spanish they lie safe behind those moun-

tains, like the dog in the mange; cannot hold this land and don't want anyone else to. The Mexican, and now the Texan South, they get as bad as the Indian every year now. Don't want traders to pass through Texas.

"But two hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of goods have been carried over this trail this year, my lad." The colonel nodded impressively. "I talk with all the traders who buy for forts and with fur-traders as well. And that is not all. Colonel Bent tells me that seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of trade has been taken in to Santa Fe from Mexico this year from everywhere. For this reason I myself and Charles Bent have made our move to Taos this year. Colonel Bent stays on the Arkansas. Too bad there is no river to Santa Fe. See how many trading stations and forts already on the Oklahoma.

"But come, I see you are more interested in stories of adventure. Is it not so? You shall have enough of it before you have finished." Steven's eyes lit with delight. "Last year a company of young men from Franklin, Missouri," the colonel continued, "reached Santa Fe, sold their goods, and months later came staggering back to Independence on foot, almost dead. They'd been attacked almost from the moment they left

Santa Fe, their mules stampeded off. They had finally to hide nearly all the money they'd made, ten thousand dollars silver—cached it on Chouteau's island on the border.

"Will they go back for the money? I bet you *que oui!* Some of them are with that caravan ahead with Bent. Major Riley will guard them to the cache. Oh, you'll have adventure aplenty my lad."

"Tonight I stand guard for the first time"—Steven was hugely pleased—"but everything has been very quiet so far, Colonel."

"Let us hope it will continue to be so," replied St. Vrain, fervently, "as we have no military escort. We're but four days out and there is a six weeks' journey at least before us. Do you see that dark streak yonder on the horizon? That's buffalo, a hundred herds, likely."

To Steven the endless, treeless prairie stretching away before them held all the lure of the sea for the sailor. His eager eyes looked over its waves, anticipating what lay beyond. A natural road, surveyed five years before as far as the Mexican border. But through the mountains beyond, where there were no roads—that was where the survey was needed; where many a good man was killed from ambush in some narrow canyon.

Great clouds were massing to the south and

rolling up into the sky, their fleecy whiteness shadowed by heavy, rain-filled masses. The *mayordomo* rode forward from the rear to consult with the colonel. They decided that, with so heavy a storm brewing, it would be well to halt and have supper over before the rain began. The cry went down along the line of the small army that stretched out for a mile in the rear, "Catch up, ca-aa-atch uu-up!"

The colonel ordered his outfit to make a halt immediately and the cook went about making a fire of caked buffalo dung, which he lit with the dried grasses of the prairie. Soon coffee was steaming in enormous pots, salt pork and beans were warming in huge iron kettles, and flapjacks were mounting on a hot iron griddle. There were many individual parties in the caravan who cooked and ate by themselves, but the colonel's outfit had a cook. The colonel carried with him a small tent, which was not always set up, a camp table and folding chairs, so that upon occasion he could eat with comfort and style. But tonight he and Steven, the *mayordomo* and Pierre, squatted about the camp fire, and in the queer half-light that hung below the clouds, now rumbling and thundering ominously, they quickly dispatched their food. The colonel at once set about making his wagon shipshape for the night, and

the *arrieros* ran about, covering their cargoes and *aparejos*. The mules and oxen were turned into the improvised corral of the caravan train; the wagons were driven into a circle and locked together by running the long tongues under the beds of the wagons ahead. This had scarcely been accomplished when with a great drive of wind that set loose rope and canvas a-slapping and whipping, the storm was upon them.

As he could not reach his own wagon, Steven ducked for the colonel's tent, which was pitched just outside the circle of wagons and in a little depression against a hill. He found the colonel sitting in the center of his bed, a pipe in his mouth, a lantern already lit, and a huge limp map spread out upon his knees. It was a buffalo hide upon which was drawn in charcoal and in colored rock a plan of the Rockies and of certain passes that lay beyond. While the thunder cracked over their heads and the little tent rocked and swayed in the gale till Steven thought it must surely collapse, St. Vrain unconcernedly examined his map, shouting to Steve, "We're takin' a new trail over the mountains this side Santa Fe; old buffalo and mountain-sheep trail. *Les animals sylvestres*, wild critters, knew it was the easiest way, but no one on two legs had sense to find it out till by accident recently."

Each word was interrupted by terrific peals of thunder, and flashes of lightning, and after a short time by a cloudburst directly over the caravan, which let loose such a deluge that the colonel's lantern was doused, while at the same time a flood of water ran over the floor and left the bed islanded in the center. Steven wished he were in his wagon, well above the flood, but he had no thought of venturing out in the storm to reach his own bunk.

"Time to go on watch." In the darkness the colonel set his mouth to Steve's ear and roared. Amazed, but none the less ready, Steven struggled out through the whipping flaps of the tent and staggered blindly toward the spot where his wagon stood. He collided with St. Vrain's *mayordomo*, who shouted, "Watch." Steve's buckskin shirt and breeches were already slimily wet, but he managed to reach inside the wagon, feel about till his hand encountered his own bundle, and drag out a heavy, stiff, Navajo blanket. He thrust his head through the slit, grabbed his gun, and stumbled toward the corral opening, to take orders.

Between peals of thunder that drowned the voice, and torrents of rain beneath which even the mules hung their heads and drooped their tails, Steve was assigned the northwest watch.

He strode away to his first post, reflecting that upon a night like this no Indian would be thinking of attack. The thought reminded him of what he felt would be Indian tactics, and he crouched lower as he walked, holding his gun ready, cocked, as though charging into battle, instead of into the prairie dark.

Beyond he could see, as the lightning flashed, a small clump of bushes on the side of a little knoll not fifty feet from the caravan corral. He made toward this, planning to crouch in the lee of it, where he would not be seen in the occasional flashes of lightning. The blanket, a poncho, was already getting in its good work, for he felt warm, if wet, next his skin, and the coarse Navajo wool was practically water-proof. The tail of his beaver cap performed its office nicely, but the brim could not keep the sheets of water out of his eyes or his mouth.

As he stooped toward the bush he heard a whizzing noise from behind, ducked involuntarily, but not enough to completely escape a blow from the missile hurled at him. It nicked his ear and scalp, but he had no time to notice the pain. A form rose up out of the blackness and grappled him. His gun was wrenched away in the struggle to keep his feet and to hold fast the arms of wire that clutched below his thighs. He kicked

forward mightily, a kick that caught the dark assailant amidships, and down they went together, to roll struggling to the bottom of the knoll. By which time Steve's long arms and longer legs had done much toward increasing the distance between himself and his attacker, and when they reached the bottom he was on top, but straining in every sinew, winded, his throat almost cut off from air by fingers of steel.

It infuriated Steve. The blood of fighting ancestors of the sea rose in his brain and suffused his eyes, so that literally he saw red in the night's blackness. Fingers gouged his eyeballs. It was agony. With a howl of rage he lifted his big-boned young body and lunged down with one hundred and seventy pounds, his knees landing in the other's stomach. The clutching hands relaxed, the figure went limp. Steven got to his feet, stumbling backward over the fallen rifle. He recovered the weapon and faced about to charge the darkness and any other attacks it harbored. A flash of lightning showed the figure of an almost nude Indian lying before him, face turned to the sky, eyes open.

Steven felt overcome by weakness; his legs were turned to water. He struggled back toward where the wagons must be, missed them completely, had a sense of being utterly alone in a

limitless space of storm and prairie. Blindly and a trifle wildly he headed in the opposite direction; then a brilliant flash showed him the wagons lying to his left. A few moments later he bumped into the captain for the night, pacing his rounds about the wagons. A sudden lull of the thunder and winds had come and the rain had lessened to a mild, steady downpour.

"Indians," Steven gasped to the captain. He pointed toward the bush where he had taken his station. "Guess I killed him!" He sank dazedly upon a bale of cargo, his eyeballs still tortured. Half a dozen men had already spread in a cordon in some deep matted grass beyond the corral. A dozen more came running; the camp was alert. There was firing, muffled and sounding far away. Steve pulled himself together and hurried toward the sound. The *mayordomo* rose up out of the grass. "On guard!" he barked. "At the gate!" and without any inquiry into Steven's condition slunk on all fours round to the other side of the wagons.

The wind stopped, and the lightning. The rain descended in a warm, steady stream. Curiously warm, thought Steven, as he wiped his dripping face. Repressing an involuntary shudder that shook him, he tried to pierce the darkness, watching this side and that, his rifle presented, nerves

tense. The rain stopped. Hours passed, hours during which Steven grew rather faint, with a strange nausea at the pit of the stomach. He longed to lie down, to sleep, and fought the shameful stupor that crept over him, and was conquered, only to settle again. He would be disgraced, and the penalty unnamable, were he to sleep at his post. He had a vague feeling of remorse that he had not said good-by to his father and mother before he left New Orleans—so long ago, so far away. He must not go to sleep.

St. Vrain, the *mayordomo*, and some others appeared suddenly out of the gloom. St. Vrain held up a dark lantern which he had been carrying under his cloak, and in the barely perceptible light looked at Steven. "Come on into my tent. He's relieved from guard duty." He nodded to one of the trappers, and Steve followed him a trifle uncertainly. In the tent the colonel drew out a kit with bandages and salve, a rude equipment but skillfully handled with the deftness of long practice.

"Tomahawk cut; leetle further and he shave off your ear. Leetle further and he shave off the top of your head—Kiowa," the colonel explained when he had finished the job. "Treacherous and fierce. Out scouting. You put fear in the spy. He run, run his horse, but we get him. Morning

is nearly come now; you will go to catch some sleep."

Steven managed to reach his bunk in the wagon just in time. Clambering over the seat, he sank with a reeling head to his couch on the bales and his senses swam off to blissful unconsciousness the moment his head touched the blanket pillow. How much time had passed when he was waked he could not imagine. The sun was shining straight in his face, but he could have slept the clock around. "Breakfast," he could hear the cry. "We're off in a half hour."

He had been asleep but a few hours and ached in every muscle. Then he remembered his tussle with the Indian the night before. He dragged himself out to the camp fire, where scalding coffee and corn bread were being passed out hurriedly. The coffee was bracing, and St. Vrain's hearty reception even more so. Steven noticed for the first time that the front of his coat and his sleeve had literally been soaked with blood, and his poncho was still damp and stained a dull red.

The *arrieros* were shouting to the mules, which came running and stood each beside his own equipage and cargo, waiting to be saddled, except a few unruly ones who kicked up their heels and dashed off before the pursuit of their drivers. The oxen went readily into their yokes, and in an

incredibly short time the caravan was once more moving over the prairie, not so smoothly this morning, for the road was gummy and slippery with mud. It was heavy and the ruts became deep.

"There'll be no nooning today," St. Vrain announced as he rode by on a mule. "We'll make Cottonwood Creek by night and go into camp there." But an unexpected occurrence was to set even the captain's decision aside. They had passed out of the storm-soaked area into a dry region where apparently not a drop of rain had fallen.

Almost unperceived by Steven, a vibrating trembling of the earth became apparent. It developed rapidly into a roar like distant thunder. Steven listened, surprised; there was something elemental, alarming, in the tremor. A number of hunters and trappers were riding by at a dead run.

"Buffalo! buffalo!" the shout went up. Leaping from his seat, Steven ran ahead in time to see a cloud of dust come rolling over the crest of a slope about a quarter of a mile beyond and to the right of the caravan. Out of the dark cloud a black moving mass came thunderingly forward. It was a herd of perhaps thousands of buffalo charging straight down upon them. The caravan train was thrown into a panic. The oxen pushed

forward mightily, lowing in their fear. The mules went crazy, pulling out of the ruts and dashing madly away from the oncoming stampede, while the drivers yelled, lashed with their long whips, and pulled back on the reins. The driver of Steven's wagon leaped out, thrusting the whip into Steve's hands, and he found himself shouting at the crazed animals, lashing them on the off side while the driver tugged at their heads on the nigh side, trying to turn them from the Trail, straining to keep the wagon from overturning, while to the right the stampede came nearer and nearer. He had a momentary impulse to jump, but realized he was safer right on the wagon. He was more frightened than ever he had been in his life before.

The men who had ridden forward were trying to turn the avalanche of buffalo, but it was impossible to swerve more than a portion of the herd, and, borne on by their own momentum, a horde was sweeping down upon the pack train. It looked as though they must pass directly over the caravan. Snorting, their little eyes blood-shot, blood streaming from the nostrils of many that had been shot, they came straight towards Steve's wagon. The mules in the path of these monarchs of the plain went wild, rearing, bucking, their heavy cargoes notwithstanding, while

some of them bolted off the Trail and clear out of sight. His oxen lowing frantically, Steve managed to pull out of the road. The hunters, who had wheeled and were riding along beside the massive animals, were firing into their ranks. It seemed as though bullets must be less than grape seed against the hairy leather hides, yet one after another fell, but without affecting the charge, for the rest stampeded on over them.

The shooting of the lead bulls, however, parted the mass and the ponies galloping alongside caused a division in the ranks; while one part swerved off at right angles, a great herd passed right through and over the ranks of the caravan. Two wagons were upset and beneath the thundering hoofs of the irresistible mass many of the mules were overtaken and went down. When the buffalo had passed over the spot nothing remained to be seen of mules, cargo, *atajo*, saddles. They were ground into the dust.

St. Vrain was dashing up and down on his horse, trying to keep the whole caravan from utter demoralization, while the hunters bore hard on the flanks of the swerving beasts, dropping many of them, and diverting them off and across the plains, following the rest of the herd. The caravan was finally brought to a halt. It took hours to pursue and bring back the stampeded

mules that had escaped and to repair the damage. When this was done and order somewhat restored, all fell to with alacrity at skinning buffalo and butchering the fresh meat. It was very welcome, as it was the first of any consequence they had had since leaving Independence.

While they were cutting out the tenderest parts, Steve helping, and learning how to wield a knife, his hands covered with grease and gore, a sound the like of which he had never before heard, and which he was never to forget, split the air. A troop of Indians mounted on pinto ponies rode over the hill, and bore down on the still disorganized caravan.

"I thought so," said St. Vrain. "That herd was stampeded down upon us."

The band of feathered red men now approached circuitously at a canter, their demonstrations friendly. There must have been fifty or sixty of them. Each brave held up both hands as a signal not to shoot, while they came nearer and nearer until they were able to see lying on the plain the large number of buffalo that had been killed, and to take in the extent of the caravan. Because of the rolling character of the country through which they were now passing it was impossible to tell how far the train might extend,

or whether beyond the rise in the near distances a military escort might be following.

Steven was thrilled at so close a view of Indians, the first he had ever seen with the exception of the redskin he had knocked out the night before. He admired their splendid physiques (they were naked above the waist), but saw that both cunning and cruelty showed in their faces. As the braves came forward St. Vrain stood up, the men all laid hands on their rifles, waiting for the Indians to make the first move. "How!" grunted the leader, and there was "Howing" on both sides, ending with the Indians dismounting. The *mayordomo* came inconspicuously forward, having ridden the length of the caravan, bringing back the stragglers, making sure that those who had gone in pursuit of either mules or cargo had returned. If they were cut off from the rest they might lose what was more important than cargo or horses; and it was necessary to be ready to take a united stand should the Indians open an attack.

St. Vrain, having butchered three buffalo and taken choice bits from half a dozen others, offered the Indians the remainder of the carcasses. This was highly agreeable to them, as it offered meat and hides without a round of their own ammunition having been fired, and as St. Vrain and the

mayordomo gave the signal to go on, the red men dismounted and set swiftly to work to skin the fifty or sixty odd carcasses that lay thick about them. The *mayordomo* informed the Indians that they were making haste to overtake a mythical division of their caravan which was ahead of them.

And so the caravan passed on without a shot having been fired, or a drop of blood having been sacrificed, other than that of the great bison.

It was late that night before Steven had the opportunity of satisfying his sharp appetite upon one of the juiciest, most delicious steaks he had ever eaten. An abundance of food now offered itself to the caravaners. Quail and grouse started up from underfoot, and at Diamond Springs, and later at Cottonwood Creek, the fish were so plentiful that they could be almost scooped out with the hands. But the caravan did not linger here nor make a camp as planned. Instead they forded the stream by moonlight. It proved deeper than the drivers had thought, so that the oxen had to swim with the heavy wagons behind them, and it was several hours before the entire caravan got safely across. There was no bivouacking until nearly dawn, by which time everyone was nearly devoured with mosquitoes. But nothing more was seen of Indians. They camped that night

on a branch of the little Arkansas and the mosquitoes continued like a plague.

From that time on good progress was made, at least fifteen miles each day. And this in spite of, or perhaps because of, the torment of flies which took the place of mosquitoes. Some of the mules ran off, wild with the fly-bitten sores for which there was no healing under the circumstances. They saw frequent bands of wild horses and traveled with buffalo constantly, sometimes parting the herds as they passed through them. The plains in the distance were dark with the shaggy coats of thousands of grazing beasts, moving in small herds of fifty to one hundred. Thousands of month-old buffalo calves frisked beside their mothers and the prairies were covered with great "buffalo rings" trodden in the grass by the vigilant bulls, circling the mothers and their young in defense against wolf and coyote.

The caravaners often shot buffalo from the wagons as they passed and paused only long enough to cut the tidbits from the carcasses, especially the tongue and the hump. St. Vrain frowned on this wantonness however, and gave orders not to shoot unless food was needed. Some of the trappers dried a quantity of the meat, stringing small strips and tying a lineful along

the sides of the wagon to dry in the sun and air.

Steven joined the buffalo-hunters a few days after their encounter with the Indians, and brought down a bull. Swept along by a trained pony in company with the racing herd, thrilling with an excitement greater than any he had yet experienced, he drew bead after bead, but his shots went wild until, by chance he was honestly persuaded, a foolish creature swerved into the path of his bullet and fell. Nevertheless, it gave the Southern lad a standing with the hardened trappers and traders, along with his exploit with the Indian on his first night guard.

"Lad," said St. Vrain one night as he sat before the fire and rolled himself a cigarette in the thin inner husk of corn, "you seem to take to the life, but you've had but a taste. There are hardships ahead. We stop at Cow Creek tonight, and tomorrow afternoon we should strike the Arkansas at the Great Bend. Pawnee Rock lies not far beyond. Ah, that is where, my young fr'en', I have encountered great dangers. It is the battleground of Cheyenne and Pawnee, the hunting-ground of all. Two years ago we stood with a caravan there for three whole days, fighting off a band of Pawnees. Forty-two men we were, and twenty-six mule wagons, with a bunch of loose

stock. We were without water two nights and nearly three days till at length I ordered to hitch up and drive on to Pawnee Forks, where the trail crosses the Arkansas. We made it, a double crossing, for the river bends like a horseshoe, as you will see. But the wagons were smashed up, and when we reached the other side the Indians began firing on us from the bluffs. We cleaned 'em out and lost but four men, with seven wounded. Twenty mules were crippled and a dozen killed."

"There was another young fr'en' of mine on that trip"—St. Vrain puffed at his cigarette reminiscently—"Christopher Carson. 'Kit,' we call him. Just a boy, Steven, make half of you, but fight like a mountain cat. Those bloodthirst' Pawnees got to know him."

"Are all the Indians so hostile?" asked Steve.

"No. The Comanches and Utes nearer the border of Mexican territory are much more friendly. We deal squarely with the Indians with whom we trade, and they with us. And the Indians of the towns, the Pueblos, as the Spaniards say, who live beyond the mountains only, in New Mexico, they do not fight unless attacked or treated badly. They cultivate the land, they work, they are good people."

"Except when the Mexicans set them on the

Americanos," said Pierre, who was sitting near. "Between Indian and Spaniard, though, monsieur, I rather deal with the Indian, me!" He spat disgustedly. "How many thousan' mile I travel to get my wage after ten year. I no longer work for American Fur Company. I work for Rocky Mountain Fur Company. *Hein*, St. Vrain? I work from Taos to Bent's Fort."

A day later the caravan had entered the rich and beautiful valley of the Arkansas, following the Trail where it swung in toward the Big Bend, through a hunting-ground that abounded in all manner of game. Thirteen miles beyond lay Pawnee Rock. There were signs of a caravan having preceded them by not many days. St. Vrain and the *mayordomo* discussed the possibility of its being the army detachment that had followed Bent's caravan. Every man was supplied with plenty of powder, two good muskets, a pouchful of balls. They threaded the valley of the Arkansas prepared for a surprise attack.

Steven, like all the other men, had for weeks been sleeping with his loaded gun by his side. Night alarms were frequent, yet the only attacks were those of mosquitoes, against which guns were useless.

There was an incessant scratching and brushing and switching of tails to keep off horse flies

and a giant and bloodthirsty mosquito. Steven's pet riding-mule ran off insane with the flies and never came back. Steven was so eager to bear his part that he slept little; as a consequence, when his turn came for night watch it was all that he could do, even with the help of the mosquitoes, to keep his eyes open and not disgrace himself eternally by falling asleep at his post. After midnight, however, it was not so difficult, but next day he drowsed and nodded on the wagon seat and slept outright while Pierre drove beside him.

He was roused when the trapper yelled out, "Pawnee Rock," and opened his eyes to see looming high before them the rock of bloody record, as gory a stone of sacrifice, according to the colonel's stories, as that famed in old Mexico for the slaughter of Aztec victims. As they passed below the face of the cliff the colonel came riding by to see what might lie beyond on the far side. But for once the sentinel of the plains harbored no dead, no skeletons. There was no sign of a struggle having taken place there, and the caravan continued onward to the Forks with a breath of relief. At the Forks they left the southern trail that followed the river so closely, and took to the northern route, which the colonel thought less open to ambush.

The Forks was the last water seen for two days.

They passed out of the verdure that followed the level river banks and into a sweltering land where the mosquitoes were still unbearable. The caravan plodded along until on a dazzling midday, when the order came to halt for a mooning, the animals stood with open, panting mouths. A large white ox that was yoked to St. Vrain's wagon lay down in the shade of the Conestoga, as it was called, and the colonel helped Steve stretch a blanket from two poles to give the beast some relief from the heat of the sun. The colonel was distressed at finding that the oxen upon which he had counted so much could not, apparently, withstand as much drought as the mules. But he learned that the animal had not had its fill at the Forks and had been suffering patiently. Steve begged to be allowed to go off with Pierre to fetch water for the ox, as they were not more than a few miles inland from the river, and St. Vrain agreed. That night they crept on hands and knees through the deep grass, their pace accelerated by the giant gnats and buzzing of their constant companions. The river lay beyond. There was scarcely a tree along the level banks, and to approach it would mean exposing themselves. They would be seen, without doubt, for a bright moon was shining now. Pierre, fortunately, struck one of the numerous buffalo trails

that had been trodden through the grass by the passage of many hoofs, and following it, still on hands and knees, they came out at the river's edge where the trail was worn in a deep and narrow cut through the bank. In the shadow of the cut they could not be seen. They flung themselves down, drank their fill, and filled the canteens. On the other side of the river reared high white sand dunes that gleamed in the moonlight. The full moon, riding like a lantern over the prairie, showed them for a few moments three feathered riders on the opposite bank. They dropped, and retreated for a mile on flat stomachs.

Reaching the caravan again, Steven poured one canteen after another into a basin for the panting creature on whose life depended their means of locomotion and the transportation of a part of that valuable cargo for the sake of which death in the desert, torture by Indians, were being defied. The ox looked up at them gratefully and drained the basin at one suck. Before long it was sufficiently revived to stagger to its feet and graze. "We return to the river again tomorrow night," said St. Vrain, "and two days later will be at Cimmaron Crossing. We'll cross the Arkansas there and take the shorter, southern trail straight to Santa Fe."

This trail led through a desolate stretch of desert, a high arid plateau, swept by blistering winds. Steven was disappointed that they would leave the Arkansas behind and not make Bent's Fort.



Chapter IV

THE RED TRAIL

A BREATHLESS dawn hovered over the desert, that, having exhaled throughout the night a withering heat stored by day, now lay swooning. For four hours the caravan had been encamped, having traveled from sunset till midnight. Now they must again bestir themselves and make what time they could before the sun was high. Just as that fiery rose peculiar to sunrise flushed the sky a cool breath of air was wafted over the desert.

The oxen widened their nostrils and lifted their heads in deep, throaty lowing. Steven sprang to his feet with a bound, and at once the whole encampment seemed to be astir. There was no making of fires, for the heat was too great and the desert had not even a tumbleweed upon it, nor yet the usual buffalo chips. There was little water left. The men nibbled at their hard-tack and crackers as they harnessed up, and the

mules snatched at the meager leaves of the scant mesquite, or the spikes of the Spanish dagger as they were whipped reluctantly into line. For three days they had plodded through the burning sands without meeting watercourse or pool—sixty-three miles between the great river and the next tiny stream it was, but now, on the fourth day, they should be nearing water. Pierre Lafitte came up from the rear, on foot, driving his string before him, and took the lead.

“Pierre has a great nose for water,” St. Vrain explained when Steve asked the purpose of the change in the order of the caravan. “He takes the lead, for the red men are between us and the Lower Spring of the Cimmaron. If Sand Creek ahead of us has not gone dry, we’ll be all right, otherwise we may not be able to get water for several days. Thank God,” he added, “that there are no women along on this trip.”

The train moved sluggishly along as the sun rose in a fiery haze. Even the first rays smote Steven with incredible power. The tufts of gramma grass and Spanish dagger had dwindled away, and only an occasional bit of sage was seen, at which the mules grasped with twitching lips as they passed. It could not yet have been eight by the sun when Pierre came running back and stopped beside the colonel’s wagon. Comanches

had been on the warpath, he said, not later than yesterday, and he had found a still bloody scalp dropped by some hasty rider. Urging the oxen to what speed they could, St. Vrain pushed on to the edge of a dune ahead. Steven drove the wagon following. As they cleared the summit they saw beneath them a small caravan, maybe a dozen wagons, drawn into corral formation; not a sign of life about it.

"Mon Dieu!" ejaculated the French traders who came up behind St. Vrain. *"Dios Mio!"* The Mexican mule-drivers crossed themselves fervently and rolled their eyes heavenward. The colonel raised a cautioning hand. The wagons had not been burned; that meant either Indians in ambush or survivors. Silently they rolled down over the brink into the arroyo. But as the inevitable rattle of chains and creak of wagon frames broke the silence, all at once a cry went up from that still circle of wagons. Out of the covered hiding-places rose a score of heads. Almost hysterically the caravaners came running forward; in relief they threw themselves upon Pierre and the colonel.

From between the curtains of a covered wagon a delicate face looked out, pale as the yucca flower, and as lovely, with startled eyes of gentian blue and smooth fair hair—a young girl, not more

than sixteen. Her arms were tight about the shoulders of a boy of ten or eleven years. Steven Mercer found himself looking toward those parted curtains, and the colonel's eyes, too, were drawn to the spot. "Sss-acré-dam'," he drew the breath between his teeth. "A woman like that, a girl, here, on the worst spot of the Red Trail!"

There were but fourteen of them, all told, after all. An old woman was inside one of the wagons, very sick. There had been thirty. Bound for Santa Fe, attacked shortly after they left the Cimmaron Crossing, pursued here where they'd taken a stand, their mules stampeded and run off, only six that were tied remaining, and two of those they had been forced to eat. They'd been here in this corral for three days and nights; not a drop of water since yesterday noon. Every night the Indians came and rode circles around them. But now they knew that the white men had plenty of ammunition and so did not open fresh attack. They did not dare abandon the wagons and walk on to the lower Cimmaron Spring, for there were hundreds of Cherokees and Apaches from Texas waiting there.

"Your only chance nevertheless," said St. Vrain, brusquely, "was to have pushed through. Let the child and the young woman ride; cache your goods. Now we are come, it is best for all

to turn back. It is as far to Cimmaron Springs, farther, with red men in between, and the way altogether harder, than to return to the Arkansas. We will cut across the desert and take our chance." He consulted the buffalo map upon which he had chalked the desert wastes and the Cordilleran wildernesses. "Right here we are at the nearest point to the river, nearer than to Cimmaron Crossing, even."

And so it was agreed. The muleless caravan placed itself under the captainship of the colonel. They were in the hands of their rescuers, and, although one of them objected, they were forced to abandon all but six of the wagons. The water was divided among the sufferers. The spare horses and mules were brought up from the rear of the caravan and as quickly as possible the six wagons were drawn out of the corral and hitched up. Whatever of the goods they contained that could not be crammed into the other wagons and redivided among the survivors was hastily hidden in holes in the dry sand and the caravan driven over the place to obliterate all signs. The girl and her brother remained in the wagon in which they were. It was driven by her father, a lean, thin-featured man. The old woman was transferred to St. Vrain's own wagon and the caravan turned about in the mounting heat and struck off

across a trackless desert at right angles to the direction from which they had come. In this way they should at sundown be nearer the upper course of the little trickle called Sand Creek than they were now to the lower crossing. The men of the party said there was water in Sand Creek, but the Indians had driven them back from it before they had drunk. The caravan would go into corral and barricade itself at noon, while after sunset Pierre and some of the hunters would, under cover of darkness, hunt water at the creek.

Then Steven learned what the desert was. The heat of ten thousand burning ovens rose from the scorched sands at his feet; for with the heavier load on his wagon he had to walk. Singing cicadas and locusts flew up and struck stingingly on the face. He thought of that pallid girl behind those closed wagon flaps, as lovely as the Dresden china figures in his mother's cabinets—so far away, so very far away. He grew light-headed, and fancied he was drinking long cool glasses of sparkling water. He was not really suffering so far, but was drawing on the reserves of untried young strength and full-blooded veins. He sang as he walked, humming gay little French airs, and St. Vrain himself came running back and spoke to him, harshly, gently, soothingly, marching with

him from time to time, while Steven showed him every now and again where he saw water.

At a high white noon there came a cessation of the slow moving, the mules slunk with drooping heads, the oxen lay in the shade of the wagons, and the men lay beneath. The girl within the covered wagon was silent, but the little lad cried out in delirium and the old lady moaned. St. Vrain then repaired to his very last resource, his hidden canteen, and poured the last of it out for the old lady, for the girl, and for the boy. The man who lay beneath their wagon reached up for the drink and would have fought with St. Vrain, but the captain of the caravan silenced him with an oath and a shove and he sank back confused.

Stupor followed, a merciful stupor that descended upon man and beast alike, and that ended only with the reviving of sundown and the awakened torments of thirst and thickened tongues. Now Steven was keenly normal except for the swollen, burning lining of his mouth.

"Keep it shut, my lad. Keep it shut," St. Vrain kept reminding him.

He would go to the very mountains for water. With Pierre, then, and two of the trappers, José and Marcel, Steven set out almost due south. They had not traveled so far as he feared they

must before they came to the bed of a stream. Dry! Dry as a bone! Sand Creek indeed! But Pierre, kneeling in the arroyo, dug a small hole into which water welled slowly. It was incredible. They threw themselves flat and pressed their cracked lips to the fluid, cool even as it rose from the sun-caked earth; swelling from some inner stream jealously absorbed by the thirsty sands. They filled the canteens, let the mules suck their fill—a slow process—and as the stream continued to well they wet their shirts. Marcel, a native of New Mexico, remained to guard the spot while the others drove the mules back with the precious canteens, and upon their return St. Vrain and a number of the *arrieros* drove a bunch of mules over the caked earth to the watering-spot. Everyone who could walk visited the little spring.

Just in time to escape the flooding moonlight they returned. And then for a few hours the caravan lay still in the white light, like a part of the desert dunes among which they cowered. Before dawn they were again moving across the caked sands, almost due north. "If we could keep going," said St. Vrain, "we'd make the Arkansas by midnight. But I'm afraid it will be another day before we can do it."

It depended upon whether the animals could stand the lack of water. It had now been nearly

forty-eight hours since they had drunk their fill at the Arkansas; the small amount taken at the tiny spring would merely tide them over for the time being. As the sun rose over that high desert the caravan moved with a forced speed across the cracked earth. Desperation drove them on. A tender chivalry rose in Steven for the girl, who was again looking out between the flaps in the wagon that followed his own. Why, she was driving the mules herself! Women needed to be attended; girls needed to be offered a glass of water when it was hot. But there was none. "Am I becoming light-headed again?" Steven reflected, angrily. The sun had risen; he handed the reins to a driver and, jumping down from his seat, strode back to the wagon following, doffed his wide hat, and asked, "Is there anything I can do, ma'm'selle, to be of service to you?"

The girl turned wonderingly; she was surprised and dazed. In the clear morning light she saw the young ruddy youth, an Achilles, whom now she looked at with seeing eyes for the first time. He appeared quite beautiful to her, young, with that companionable quality that she had found only in the little brother whose head was pillowed on her lap. She looked at Steve and he saw in the blue eyes, that were fringed with dark silky lashes, an expression he had never seen on

a woman's face, a look which he was to learn meant suffering and discouragement, with courage and hope to carry on. She gazed at him silently. He was embarrassed and would have gone on ahead, but she spoke in a moment:

"How nice. No, sir, they ain't anything anyone can do, is there? Do you think we'll ever get there?" She spoke softly. "Doren is sleeping good now"—she nodded to the child in her lap—"and papa is asleep back in the wagon. He needs it; he never slept all the time we were back there after they ran the mules off. He couldn't bear to give up the freight. It was—terrible." Tears stood in her eyes.

Steven had been walking along beside the wagon, but now he jumped up on the seat and took the reins from her. Of course they'd make it. St. Vrain said they'd left the Indians behind now, and once they reached the Arkansas they'd be fairly near Bent's Fort, and then they'd be safe.

Papa had put everything they owned into the goods, the girl went on, stonily. Sold their home, all mamma's furniture she left. She had thought the trip might do Doren good; his lungs were weak. They'd come all the way from Hartford, Connecticut, by way of the Lakes and then down the Mississippi to St. Louis. A wonderful trip

that was, but this last journey had been like a nightmare. Weren't there any folks at all in this country, but Indians? She and Doren had lain in the bottom of the wagon while the fight with the Comanches was going on, and two of the men who had been shooting from the back of their wagon had been dragged out and killed and their hair cut off right before her eyes.

"Scalped!" Steven nodded. "I know." He felt the scar above his ear reflectively. "Why don't you try to lean back against the bales there and close your eyes and sleep?" he suggested. He made a place for her head.

She did not speak again, and Steven drove on through the heat. A fine alkaline dust hung over the desert, settling upon men, mules, and wagons, and sifted in upon the face of the sleeping girl. Far away spirals of whirling dust appeared, and died down. The horizon was lost in a vague haze and the universe seemed to be all one feverish, infernal plain. About eleven o'clock Pierre came back along the line, giving the signal to halt. Hardened men as they were, traders and trappers, Mexicans born to the desert sun, they were ready to stop, yet so unusual was the respect felt for Ceran St. Vrain, and so effectual the discipline which he had always been able to maintain, there had not been a single instance of insub-

ordination at his orders for the march. Yet now many could no longer stagger.

The mules were nearly perishing of thirst, and Steven had to turn his head away from their agonized faces. He would have liked to pour the last drops in his canteen over the caked muzzles, but the water must be guarded for the girl lying in the wagon behind him. St. Vrain came back to see how they were doing. He beckoned to Steve. The old woman had just died. They would bury her there. Her husband was delirious; the poor old fellow did not comprehend it, mercifully.

Some of the men from the rear of the caravan were pushing ahead on foot in pursuit of phantom water-holes—mirages. St. Vrain sternly ordered them back and took counsel with the oldest scouts and drivers, to the end that, leaving Steven as his *mayordomo* in charge of the spent caravan, the colonel himself went ahead on foot, following his great white ox, which stumbled forward, head low to the ground, neck outstretched, as though it scented moisture on the glimmering air. It was the last hope for the faithful beasts, which had been denied their fill at the tiny Sand Creek. Without wagons or food the men of the party might make the Arkansas

River after nightfall. But what of the girl and the little fellow?

Which of them was it tossing and moaning beneath that flimsy shelter now? Steven stepped upon the axle and peered within their wagon. He saw the man, raised upon one elbow, draining the last precious drops in the canteen which Steven had placed there for the girl. He uttered an involuntary protest, but it was too late. The man sank back once more in a stupor, and at that moment a thin cry went up, carrying along the palpitating air: "Water! water!"

New life was given the caravan. The mules strained at the wagons; the men plodded beside them; they pushed ahead with their last strength and came, after interminable striving, through a living furnace that consumed with flameless heat, upon a great circular depression in the alkaline plain—a buffalo wallow, at the bottom of which was water. Water, thank God, muddy but not stagnant, thick and slimy as it was, precious to that caravan. Canteens were filled first, hastily, tremblingly, and then the oxen were released from their yokes and led down to the muddy hole where the *arrieros* were restraining their mules from falling into the pool or from lying down in the wet, hot mud. Two of the animals tottered at the brink, died, and fell down the slope, whence

they had to be hauled back and away. It was not a lovely sight, nor were the men who drank. Steven strained the contents of his canteen through a fine nainsook handkerchief which he extracted with difficulty from his things, and after filling his own mouth to wash down the muddy fluid which he had first drunk, and blessed, he hastened to the wagon where the girl lay.

White as death, her lips cracked, she was half conscious, but took the water pitifully, eagerly. The boy had refused, shaking his head, "Sister first," he whispered. "She gave all the rest last night to papa and me." Steve looked about for the man, but he had been one of the first at the water-hole, lying on his stomach till he could drink no more. He was tending the mules now, which he did faithfully.

Not until after dark did they move, when a cooler air had come creeping over the alkali to take the place of the hot air that rose from the desert. The water-hole, once a large salt lick in which the rains had gathered, had saved their lives. Toward dawn they stumbled upon the banks of the Arkansas, where the animals waded into the clear stream, and the men, clothes and all. Steven half carried, half led, Doren and his sister down to the water.

At sundown the next evening it was a different lot of beings who sat about their camp fires under the great cottonwoods that lined the river bank. Young grouse were roasting on a turning spit, and fish from the river. A short way up a little tributary stream Pierre had caught a beaver which he skinned at once. Having roasted the body whole for the men, he now prepared that great delicacy, the tail, for the young lady. He thrust the stick into it and, holding it over the fire until the large scales puffed up, he peeled it and in a moment offered it on a tin plate. Coffee bubbled, and unleavened bread was flapped on the hot stones.

St. Vrain now talked with the men of the rescued caravan, none of whom he had ever seen before, and learned something of the history of each. Three were from Franklin, Missouri; several were from Pennsylvania or New England; and the remainder were traders from the South. None of them had ever before been on the Santa Fe Trail, although two of them had been by boat up to Fort Gibson, Oklahoma, at the Three Forks, where they had traded with the Indians.

The father of the girl introduced himself as James Bragdon, of Hartford, Connecticut, and though he was a man of rather wry face and expression, he made himself agreeable. He intro-

duced his "little gel," Hope, affably, and his little lad, Doren. Yet Steven could not like the man. The Mexicans and the bronzed trappers all came up, as though casually, to gaze at the girl. Among those burned and weathered faces her fairness shone like a white yucca moth at night. Yet there was stamina behind the seeming fragility; food and water had revived her, brought a coral color to her lips, so ashen upon the desert trip. She was pretty, Steven thought, though, being used to fair women, he was not so startled by her exceeding blondness as were the men of the caravan, accustomed to darker Frenchwomen and Indian squaws, so that this girl seemed almost of another species of being.

She wore a plain little figured print dress, somewhat short-waisted, reflecting still the Empire style, but with leg-o'-mutton sleeves, a broad collar, and a wide blue slat sunbonnet. Doren was a nice-looking boy, rather fair himself, with delicate even features. He adored his sister and still took refuge from his father's discipline with her. She in turn worshiped and mothered the boy, quietly but with a passionate fierceness, but to everyone else she was indifferent.

One of the trappers came up with the gift of a buffalo robe for her and a smaller robe for the boy, already smoked and softened. St. Vrain

kept a sharp eye on Bragdon's daughter, and cautioned her not to step as much as fifty feet from the wagons. The trail ran westward almost parallel to the banks of the Arkansas, which was flowing now through cottonwood groves, and tree and shrub offered ambush for prowling savages. The caravan rested profoundly that night. Steven took a watch for six hours, and then spread his blanket in the cool grass beside the river.

The caravan did not start until toward evening of the following day, for both beasts and men were exhausted from their march in the desert and the strain of the long fast from water. Refreshed by food, drink, and rest, they set out to make ten miles that night, and by a bright moonlight this was accomplished. A keen watch was being kept for Indians, and St. Vrain hoped that possibly they might encounter Major Riley of Fort Leavenworth, returning from Chouteaux Island at the Mexican border, whither he had escorted Colonel Bent's caravan. But they saw no sign of him, and Pierre was sure that he saw fresh tracks on the Trail just beyond their first night's camp by the river, tracks leading back over the Trail. As indeed they were, for the major with his three companies had passed while St. Vrain was on the desert.

But as day followed day and no Indians were seen, they began to breathe easier. The river here was from five to six hundred feet wide, flowing through a rolling plain which stretched away for hundreds of miles without a tree, apparently. Yet the stately trees upon the banks of the river and along the bottom land were enormous and ancient. Sometimes the river narrowed and flowed between banks of shale and limestone, but they had left the gleaming white cliffs of sand far behind. They were ascending steadily in altitude, approaching the slopes of the Rockies before them. The hunters brought in rabbit, beaver, quail, antelope, and even bear meat. They knew every foot of the land, every small stream, every haunt of the four-footed. Buffalo was varied with black-tail deer, the finest venison in the world.

This was the land of the Shoshones, the Snake Indians, the greatest of the Indian nations, who were of the same race as the wild Comanches to the south. They were a fine and friendly people, said St. Vrain. Steven was now joining the short hunting forays by means of which the trappers kept the caravan supplied with meat. He was learning from them the ways of the wild, in which the wily and seasoned white men surpassed even the Indians.

He never failed to stop and ask at the girl's wagon how she fared and if there was anything that he might do for her. But beyond a feeling of pity and sympathy, and a growing dislike for the father, he had little conversation with Hope Bragdon after their escape in the desert. This was a world for men; he pressed heels exultantly into his mare's flanks and rode ahead over the road in advance of the caravan, scouting. 'Twas adventure he had come for, not ladies' company. They were making speed as they neared Bent's Fort, although it was a constant ascent to a higher altitude. Beyond them lay the Rocky Mountains, blue and jagged.

Sometimes Doren rode with him on a gentle pony. Hope Bragdon's austerity softened before his kindness to the boy and she grew to look for Steven, her face lighting at his approach. Hope Bragdon's life so far had not departed from the hard and sterile traditions of her New England heritage. She was used to enduring, to going without, to repressing any desire that might be regarded as an indulgence. Even her passionate love for the little brother whom her mother had thrust into her tiny arms when she lay dying had to be curbed. But it only burned the more fiercely for that. If she petted him when as a little fellow

he ran crying to her with a hurt, it only earned him a slap or a harsh reproof.

The tiring round of household tasks left Hope with little enthusiasm; her nature reflected the cold, repressed, dreary outlook of her life.

Steven felt this lack of grace and did not realize why it was or notice that her face did lighten when he dropped by to talk, because she invariably became more repressed and unresponsive. Yet as the caravan halted on that last night before they made the Fort the two blond young people stood talking for a moment in the shafts of the late afternoon sun. St. Vrain eyed them shrewdly, and later, pulling at his pipe, he spoke unexpectedly:

"I wish you'd marry her, lad. It's not safe for a woman like that to be in this country loose like. French trapper's likely to stride up when we make the Fort and offer her father a couple of hundred fox or beaver, and some horses thrown in, for her, and from what I've seen of the old man he's likely to take it—and hand her over."

Steven was aghast; then he smiled weakly. "You will have your jest, Colonel Ceran. I have no thought of maids or matrimony yet. I am not eighteen."

"*Non!*" the colonel was surprised. "*Est-ce possible?* There is plenty of time, true, before

thee. But wait till you get to the Fort"—he tapped down the tobacco in his red Indian pipe—"you will see something more of this land, of this life of men and beasts on the frontier. You will see the kind of women to which the men become accustomed, also. And you will see something of trading, real trading."

Twenty-four hours later they rounded a curve in the river bank and came upon the new Fort, begun just the year before, and scarcely more than a third finished now. All about the heavy walls of the main building were pitched dozens of tents, made of buffalo skins, or deerhide stretched over saplings for the briefest sort of shelter. Blanketed Indians, fringed trappers, a duke in fustian who turned out to be Colonel Bent himself, turned the encampment into a busy community.

Shouts of welcome greeted the train led by St. Vrain as it came at a run, pellmell, down a short hill and up the slope to the trading station, already made famous by the name of the Bent brothers. Some of the men of the rescued party were weeping with relief and the let-down of emotions after their exhausting journey. Yet Hope Bragdon, pale and with trembling lips, only held tighter to the tired boy beside her.

French trappers and Mexican *arrieros* swore

in their respective tongues, horses whinnied, oxen lowed, the mules brayed. There was a *mêlée* as the caravan gradually came to a stop in the open space beside the half-finished buildings, and the unloading began.

St. Vrain immediately introduced Steven to Colonel Bent, and at the same time informed him that there was a young woman with the caravan. Was there any white woman at the Fort at the time who could go to her? There wasn't. Then would Steven go and say that a room in the Fort would be at her disposal? Steven went, and found Hope hovering anxiously over Doren, who felt sick at his stomach, he said, and lay listlessly on the blankets, his slender face quite sallow under the tan. Hope was trying to get her fire to burn in order to heat water for the boy, to make him a comfortable bed, and to start food for her father at the same time, while Bragdon attended to his animals.

Hope was made the more nervous because outside her wagon a circle of Indian squaws had gathered, watching the young white woman intently. Their stolid demeanor could not hide their wonder and curiosity. St. Vrain spoke to them in a voice of authority, ordering them away with a wave of the hand, with the exception of one young woman whom he instructed to wait upon

the white girl and attend to her wants. The Indian was a Pawnee, a pleasant-faced girl, who spoke and understood a little English. In a few moments she had the fire burning well and had laid a soft couch of white pine boughs. Hope was afraid to move Doren, who seemed to have collapsed with exhaustion. The Indian girl brought a broth made of fresh venison with herbs for the boy, and roasted quails with new corn for Hope and her father. Hope fed Doren with a spoon first; he was too far gone with fatigue to be fully roused.

When he had made sure that Hope was comfortably taken care of, Steve hurried back to St. Vrain and Bent, who had gone on into the great room of the Fort where business was transacted and traders and trappers ate and lounged and smoked. Here the *engagés*, the trappers employed by St. Vrain and the Bents, passed their time when they were not out on the ranges, hunting. The room was crowded now with as many Indians and hunters and trappers as could squeeze into it, and the air was filled with the smoke of Indian pipes and Mexican cigarettes. Against the smooth adobe walls hung colored blankets. The ceilings were dark beamed with heavy, hand-hewn cedar timbers from the mountains; the floors were roughly boarded. Great fireplaces at

either end of the room threw out enough heat to warm the entire place in winter, and now their warmth was such that all the doors were open. Colonel Bent and his brother George slept in small adjoining rooms, and on the other side of the main hall lay the only other completed room, a large *bodega*, or storehouse.

A babel of Spanish, French, English, mingled with the strange, halted gutturals and intoned syllables of several Indian tongues. Steven was stirred with that keen delight that he had always felt on the waterfront of the Mississippi, where dark-skinned East Indians and yellow Chinese ate bananas from some South American port. In these faces he fancied he saw strange racial resemblances—the dark, fine aquilinity of the far East in a Cheyenne brave; the broad cheek bones and narrowed eyes of the Japanese leered at him in the blanketed redskin holding out some silver-work for his inspection.

“That is Sleek Foot, the Navajo, the slickest fur-trader that ever wandered from his hogan,” warned St. Vrain. “Take nothing of him. . . . There’s to be no trading till morning, Sleek Foot.” The Navajo grunted a protest. “Colonel Bent’s orders. Then you’ll see something, Steven, my lad, that’ll show you the art of trading.”

Through the open doors there now came Indian

women bringing great pots and platters of food. Roast fowl of all sorts was heaped on the table, stewed squash and corn bread, the dark beans to which Steven had long since become accustomed, and last of all great hunks of bear meat. As a special feast Colonel Bent had coffee served with that greatest of all delicacies and delights, sugar. The braves and French 'breeds sat on the floor about the wall, and ate with their hunting-knives and fingers from the food that was heaped upon a huge tortilla before each. When they had at length finished, they ate the tortilla and drank from tin cups. The traders sat on benches about the long rough table, and under the swinging lanterns they fed as men should feed. Colonel Bent knew well that to keep the Indians and the trappers well-fed brought to his shelves many a pelt that meant good gold on the Mississippi.

When the hairy white men and the unbearded savages had their fill and lay or squatted with gorged stomachs before the flaming logs a fiddle struck up. There was buck-and-wing and high stepping and Indian clogging, and some of the gay French lads took turns with the pretty Cheyenne maidens. A French trapper chucked a pretty squaw under the chin. It was Pierre Lafitte, *mon Dieu*, already celebrating his return and the money in his pockets. Out flashed a

tomahawk, and a friendly Arapahoe was just in time to save Pierre's skull from falling into two pieces. The trappers began their gaming before the fire.

"Little enough to lose tonight," shrugged Robert Bent, "tomorrow when the trading's over they'll squander their winter's catch. Pierre," he called out, "save out enough to stake yourself. You don't want to go in debt for provisions for next winter."

"So you have thrown in your lot with the traders, my boy," said Colonel Bent, kindly, to Steven. "My friend St. Vrain tells me that you are no tenderfoot; *au contraire*, that you tackled the Kiowa scout on the night of your first watch. It was perhaps just as well that you did not overtake our party, for we were attacked when nearly here, and two of my fr'en's shot before my nose, almos'. And that with Major Riley jus' behin' us and Captain Felipe Cooke ahead. You did not meet him returning? Nor hear the news?"

"I have heard from a returning guide that the ten thousand dollars which the young traders from Franklin cache at Chouteaux Isle was all there. They find it all uncovered! The dirt had been washed away by the river and the rains; it was safe and sound, yet anybody could have taken it." St. Vrain roared with laughter at such a tale

of buried treasure, and Steve's eyes were almost as round as a child's.

"We have had little trouble with the Indians," Bent went on, seriously, "until just these past few years since the free traders began to come over the Trail. If you treat the Indian right he will treat you fair enough, I have found. I go everywhere, alone, up into the country among all the tribes, and am away for months at a time. But when your government breaks treaties, like where they give the Cherokees' land on the Arkansas and the Verdigris to the Creeks, you see what happens! Reprisals, like the attack on the caravan you rescued. And traders are careless; go away from their wagons alone, get shot. Then the others shoot at all Indians, good or bad, and something is started, because some unfriendly Indians of a different tribe maybe kill one fellow off by himself. They do not behave that way with me. I have more trouble with the Spaniard," he laughed; "but be careful in Santa Fe, *mon fils*."

"I have heard something from Colonel Ceran of the history of the traders to Santa Fe," Steven replied.

"Do not get entangled with Mexican politics," warned Colonel Bent. "Do not be embroiled in anything, so you will not prejudice the foreign trade, and find yourself enchained for a bagatela.

Above all," he smiled broadly, "be careful with the beautiful señoritas." With which cheerful advice he bid them goodnight and Steven followed St. Vrain outside to his tent. In spite of forebodings about the message he carried, he fell asleep almost in an instant, drugged with the rare air of the foothills, the scent of pine knots burning, and all the fresh strangeness of glorious mountains that loomed above them.

He knew that morning had come because, after a conscious interval, he felt tinglingly alive. Opening his eyes upon the buffalo hides that tented him, he realized that he was in a different land, that he was at an elevation far above the sea level which he had always known, that he had at last crossed the plains. Steven leaped to his feet and thrust his head between the flaps of the tent, intent on getting himself water for bathing. His eyes were caught by a strange pantomime going on just beyond, in front of Bragdon's wagon. A Cheyenne chief stood before the Yankee with a horse at either hand. Bragdon was holding out a jug and a sack of something or other. The Indian shook his head and gestured, but as the white man continued merely to stand and look at him the Indian threw at his feet a large bundle of beaver pelts. Bragdon stepped back to his wagon and started to pull forth more of his

wares; but just at this moment Hope appeared in the door of the tent. The chief stepped forward, caught her by the hand, and pulled her over to where her father stood, making signs and talking rapidly, while he pointed at the shrinking girl.

It was unmistakable. There was an expression of greed on the Yankee's face as he stooped to examine the pelts before he concerned himself with his daughter, and Steven wondered for a moment if he would actually consider parting with Hope for a good trade. The Indian evidently thought it a settled thing. Two horses for a squaw! And beaver to boot! When a Cheyenne maiden was won for two! Yet as Bragdon seemed to hesitate the brave called to an old woman puttering near at her fire and she waddled over to interpret. "No more unless the maiden is strong and good to work," translated the squaw in careful measured English. At this juncture Steven stepped into the picture, forgetting his morning ablutions. Hope had torn her hand away from the brave, and now she turned with relief at sight of Steve's tumbled tawny head.

"He wanted to buy *me!*" she cried with more than a trace of fright.

"I don't wonder," replied Steven; "so would many. Too bad that we don't do it that way." He grinned as he looked at Bragdon, but there

was dislike beneath the smile, and the older man flushed with annoyance and embarrassment.

"The greasy savage," he muttered. "Do they think they can get a white girl for a few mangy beaver skins?"

"You sound, sir," said Steven, forgetting caution in a sudden rage against this man, "as though it were the amount only that deterred you; the number of skins only that you were regretting!"

"Mind your own business and I'll tend to mine," replied Bragdon, harshly. "We're white, ain't we?"

"I beg your pardon," Steven replied, stiffly. Yet he could not, for all that, get over the feeling that Bragdon's fingers itched for the furs or more like them.

Hope was feeding Doren some of the ground Indian meal prepared by the Pawnee girl, and smiled shyly at Steven as he passed, "as though she really had something to be grateful for, poor child," he thought, and was touched, for it was the first time that he had seen her act naturally, without a stiff reserve when anything was done for her.

He found the three traders taking coffee, bacon, pan bread, and fried Indian mush at the table in the big room, and joined them. The trading

was to begin shortly, and already a crowd of Indians was gathered outside the rear door of the establishment. It was Colonel Bent's custom to deal thus, spreading his wares before the door, and permitting no one to come inside but the chiefs.

By mid-morning the trading was well under way. Colonel Bent was exchanging only a portion of the goods which St. Vrain had brought with him and the balance of what he himself had transported over the Trail a few weeks earlier. The independent traders who had been in St. Vrain's train, and those whom he had rescued, were at liberty to dispose of anything they did not wish to reserve for the Santa Fe trade. Steven was amazed to see buffalo robes, beautifully cured and sometimes bound, sold for one dollar. Even on the plains they brought a dollar and a half, while in the cities, where they were now very fashionable, they were sold for not less than thirty-five dollars. The Indians brought forward their pelts, the lustrous silver fox, rich mink, and beaver, otter, deer, and golden tawny cat of the mountains, the lynx, the white and prairie wolves full plumed. Beside the silky little prairie fox lay antelope and buffalo, and the striped panther of the Rockies shone beside the pelts of grizzly and cinnamon bear.

The red man spread his furs upon the ground before himself and his horses, all of his wealth to be exchanged for the white man's goods—flannel and beads, whisky and tobacco, sugar, whistles, mirrors, knives, or guns. The trade was on. Colonel Bent knew his Indians and could speak their tongues, but when one of a nation whose language he did not know came forward, the deal would be made through using a bundle of sticks to represent the goods.

The Navajo whom Steven had seen the night before came forward and laid a buffalo robe upon the ground. William Bent laid down two sticks, indicating the equivalent in goods for the robe; the Navajo insisted on another stick, a smaller one again, and the colonel appeared to relent. He gave in, when the deal was concluded to the Navajo's satisfaction. For beaver the Indians got three dollars a pound; there were fifty packs each made up of sixty pelts that would bring five dollars a pound in St. Louis. But Colonel Bent was disappointed. "Ashley got one hundred and twenty-three packs last year," he complained.

For a land otter three dollars was paid, and one dollar for a buck, two doe, or four 'coon skins. The braves were already tottering about, drunk from the whisky they craved and from tulapai, that heady distillation from the giant cactus made

by the Apaches. St. Vrain swore and William Bent was angry, for he could see that before the day was half over there would be knifings and quarrels. Where had they gotten it?

"A nice way, this, to repay our help," fumed St. Vrain. "Some of the traders in the other caravan have been selling them liquor." Alcohol was sold from two to five dollars a pint, but it was against the law to sell to Indians.

Some of them were buying tobacco at a dollar and a half a plug, and Steven could scarcely credit his eyes when he saw an Indian give a dollar and sixty cents for a pint cup of gunpowder, while for the same measure of steaming coffee he paid nothing at all at Colonel Bent's, although at any other trading station even the trappers were obliged to pay one dollar and twenty cents for the drink, sweetened.

Steven bought from a young Pueblo Indian who had come up from Taos a beautiful lynx robe, for which he paid in silver. The Indian was delighted with the exchange and naively offered additional skins, which Steven refused. He bought also a strange garment made by the Cheyenne squaws of sewed rabbit skins, the only fabric that plains Indians had until the traders came, and for this he gave silver money. "A bad precedent, for a trader," he was warned.

By the time night fell there had been half a dozen brawls, and when Steven entered the big room of the Fort at dusk he saw his friend Pierre gambling with a slight, sandy-haired trapper in fringed buckskins, a lad not much older than Steve and not nearly so tall or so broad.

"My fr'en' Kit Carson," St. Vrain introduced. "I have tol' you of the trip we take together two year ago. He's just back from the Picketwire, as these here folks call Le Purgatoire, the River of Los' Souls."

The stranger bowed gravely and said with a sad smile, "I'm aimin' to keep my friend Peer here busy till he gets his fill of playin'; 'cause, if he gambles his nine years' stake away, isn't nothin' will save some one's getting knifed before mornin'."

Carson was to guide St. Vrain's party over the Raton Pass and down to Santa Fe, a ten-day trip, ordinarily. Three mornings later they were off, ascending into a rarer air and a rocky grandeur that filled the boy from New Orleans with a headiness like wine. Carson dropped alongside Steven often and rode beside him, pointing out spots of interest. "Beyond that far peak yonder"—he nodded northwest—"you see that blue shadow? That's Pike's Peak. They get you, you know, the

mountains," he added, reflectively, "You can't never leave 'em, once you've known 'em."

"Kit's a great lad," said St. Vrain. "Already he knows every inch o' the land for a hundred miles; the sources o' streams, which way they flow; every peak and pass. He's a fearful fighter, too, lookin' sweet as a woman, yet he can get along with Indians, even at his age, better than anyone else except William Bent."

On the third or fourth day they struck Raton Pass, and at that altitude Steve felt a ringing in his ears and an exultation forever to be associated with the grandeur of the country that lay before them as they emerged, and thereafter as they wended their way over hemlock-darkened slopes and saw beyond the bare reaches above timber line the distant jagged structure of snowy peaks. Santa Fe lay below, they told him. The caravan threaded narrow canyons and ascended to high trails from which they could look down into vast valleys in the bottom of which molten quicksilver flowed in narrow ribbons. Across the empty spaces the blue light of the heavens hung motionless, amethystine in the shadow of titanic hills or the eclipse of a far cloud.

Down mountain roads strewn thick with stone and perilous to the feet of oxen the heavy wagons rocked and slid, with locked wheels, through fer-

tile level valleys, and one bright morning they awoke in a land that shone red as an inferno, where earth and rock alike were red, the color of the red man's skin. The stunted cedar, the cloudless turquoise sky, alone remained familiar to make the stranger know he was still upon this earth.

"Why is it so red?" Steven marveled.

"It's the blood that's been shed here," replied St. Vrain, solemnly, "and the red Indians that've lived and died and been buried in this land."

"Glorieta!" yelled the mule-drivers. "Glorieta!" answered the echoes.

"Santa Fe tonight," shouted Kit Carson. "Santa Fe! Santa Fe!" The echoes must have carried almost across the hills.



Chapter V
*THE COMING
OF THE CARAVAN*

IT HAD been a long while for Consuelo Lopez to await the coming of the caravan from the East. She was not conscious, perhaps, that she was waiting, nevertheless the summer days had passed in an expectancy that held off Don Tiburcio's wooing. It was an effective barrier. He himself felt that Consuelo was waiting for something. He hoped that it would prove to have been for him.

On this late and golden afternoon of midsummer she sat on a bench in the garden which was Doña Gertrudis' pride, and smoldered while Manuel gathered little roses for her. Against the adobe wall stood a sentry of hollyhocks, and in a wide bed each side the path rioted zinnia, in all the extravagant colors with which God has pigmented a richly mineral soil. Geranium and bougainvillea rioted against the "Madonna" blue of the doorway, and honeysuckle vied with Mexi-

can pinks—"clavelitas"—that most winsome, exquisite, and spicy fragrance.

Consuelo herself was dressed for a garden. Don Tiburcio's bales had yielded this yellow pineapple cloth from the West Indies, and China had sent the lemon-colored shawl, embroidered in crimson and soft jade. An amber necklace circled her throat, and tremulous pendant amber swung from golden filigree at the lobes of her pretty ears. She seemed like imprisoned sunlight and Don Tiburcio's heart would have been less than human had it not quickened as he stepped through the blue gate and came toward her, bowing with deep courtliness.

Consuelo has learned within a few weeks to restrain her impatience. The talk is polite, "And your grandmother? I trust she also slept well?" Don Tiburcio concludes his inquiries after the health of the family. At this point Doña Gertrudis must call Manuel within the house and Consuelo and Don Tiburcio are left alone. Consuelo parries for a desperate hour the question in Don Tiburcio's eyes, with animated talk of Mexico and the far lands of which Don Tiburcio has knowledge. Of the carven stone balconies of the City of Mexico, the music, the brilliant life of the capital.

"In Chihuahua, too, they promenade of a fair evening, señor?"

"Ah yes, señorita. The plaza is most lively. With all the señoritas and matrons promenading in one direction, and the gallants in the opposite direction, many a *mirada* is thrown from one eye to another in passing."

"Ah, that is like Spain, is it not?"

"It is. But your country here is more like Spain. The mountains of Spain. When I was a lad I accompanied my grandfather there on a visit to cousins who lived in the mountains, in towns like this." He swept his hand toward the pine-covered foothills of the Sangre de Cristo.

"But tell me, señorita"—the proud hidalgo's face became suffused as he leaned above Consuelo, sitting so stiffly upright on her bench under the clematis vine—"when am I to have an answer to the question I asked so many weeks ago?" He stood before her, very fine, a silk scarf thrown over his arm, his silver-buttoned breeches flaring open elegantly from the knee.

Consuelo swayed against the vines, against a tumult of emotions. Why struggle longer? Her lashes drooped; she retreated, yielding.

"Soon the caravans from the East will arrive," he pressed. "At any moment now they may come, and I, I must not linger, once they are here."

I have urgent affairs calling me back." Fatal words. They aroused at once in a rebel heart the half-stilled desire for life to bring her more, the half-acknowledged wonder as to what that Eastern land might hold for her. She remembered again the thrill of the days when the caravans came. Hesitated, and was lost, to Don Tiburcio at least, wholly for that day.

"*La Caravana!*" she exclaimed, all glowing animation at once. "How exciting! One would have thought that the Comanches or the Apaches had them all. Why, then, do they delay so, when they are keeping you waiting, señor?" Consuelo's lashes fluttered disturbingly. Having yielded not an inch, poutingly she dared Don Tiburcio's gaze. *Coqueta!* Minx! What was he to think? Did she want him? How much more must her vanity be flattered? Perhaps Don Tiburcio himself was a little bit tired of the waiting. Disconcerted, he said no more for the moment, and was rewarded by an utterly ravishing smile.

Bees droned through the sunlight and a silence like molten honey. Beyond the adobe wall and across the "sakey" at the end of the garden suddenly there rose a shouting that ran through the town. "*Aqui vienen los carros. La Caravana!* [Here come the wagons. The caravan]."

Don Tiburcio rose quickly to his feet. "Par-

don, señorita, I must go to meet them at once. *Hasta luego, pues* [Till later, then]." He bowed his departure almost unnoticed by Consuelo, for the tumult in her chest. She ran through the house. It was almost deserted, except for old Lupe and for Doña Gertrudis, who had already taken her seat beside the front windows and was peering discreetly, but with avidity, through the blinds. Consuelo flounced across the courtyard, through her own room, and into a room beyond.

It was Felicita's, and the window there was neither barred nor curtained. A high window, with a tiny railed balcony from which one could see way up or down the street. But it was already filled with Felicita, who found herself pulled down by the skirts, while Consuelo clambered up on a chair and disposed her own person for a fine view in either direction.

Just in time. The dust of the caravan came rolling along to the accompaniment of shouts of greeting, of long whistles. On it came in the late afternoon sun, like a special cloud of gold; and now from the cloud emerged the first wagon, lumbering and swaying behind three teams of great white oxen that to Consuelo's ravished gaze seemed to snort blood and to be harnessed with gilded leather. Strange, clear-cut voices rang out among the familiar *gritos* of the *arrieros*.

How they pierced the consciousness! On came the *carros*, and the laden mules, helter skelter, right down their street. *Madrecita mia*, what luck! And then all the rest of the caravan melted away into the golden haze of dust, and Consuelo's gaze was riveted upon one figure on horse, trotting briskly, side-stepping, as though he and his rider had not been ready to die of fatigue an hour before. A blond, hatless Americano, with hair like burnished metal in the sun, and a face—a face! The caravan halted, some difficulty turning in the narrow street ahead, or a jam of mules, and the rider drew up almost beneath her window. He passed a kerchief over his warm brow and lifted his head to look about. His glance traveled toward Consuelo, peering over the funny little crooked balcony. He may have heard the involuntary exclamation that had escaped her.

They gazed straight at one another. Steven thought, "What an uncommonly bewitching face," and instinctively bowed. "Señorita," he saluted, "*Buenas tardes*," and rode on, surprised that such a radiant picture should have risen out of the dust to frame itself in the window of a square adobe house. Consuelo saw him pass with a moment of dismay, as though this buckskin-clad young god might be riding on out of her picture—and then, for her eyes were still filled with his smile, saw

nothing more, not even the swaying Dearborn wagon that followed close upon the dust of the youthful trader, nor the pale girl who sat on the front seat, tears of relief streaming down her face, a boy held close in her arms.

Consuelo scrambled down from her perch and away to the *sala* in search of news. Oh, if she could but run out into the street and hear for herself, and see! Bah! What restrictions! Perhaps from the dining room she might catch again a glimpse of them as they turned down the street. She ran into the *comedor*, bumping full into Luis, who jumped as though a snake had rattled at him, and turned a trifle angrily, setting down the silver pitcher which he held. He recovered at once and, holding his sister at arm's-length, remarked, pleasantly, fondly: "How lovely we are looking! All ready for the dance tonight, eh! But where so fast?" Ah, so there would be a *baile*! Enchanting! Consuelo smiled happily and unaffectedly at Luis, grateful as always for a moment of real affection from him.

"Oiga, little sister, listen. Say nothing of having seen me at home after siesta, wilt thou not? I should be at the *bodega* right now, receiving any new goods. Eh?" She nodded, and he kissed her good-by, hurrying off through the rear of the house.

It was quite dark and late, nearly nine o'clock, before Don Anabel returned from the warehouse with Luis and found Doña Gertrudis fuming and fluttering. The roast was entirely burned up, they would be late to the *baile*, which was always at ten, and her powder was already pure paste. She fluttered before them into the dining room, where a special effort had been made for the occasion when, she hoped, Consuelo would at last announce to the family what they so much wished to hear. The good Doña Gertrudis adored her daughter, and she was a trifle afraid of her, too, of her youth, her beauty, her wit, though Consuelo's tongue was always dutiful to her parents. Nor would Don Anabel have tolerated any lack of that obedience and respect which every true Spaniard demands of his children. He would not have forced a marriage that was against his daughter's heart, yet he was pleased with the idea of this union. But Consuelo made no occasion to tell him that the matter was settled. In the garden, just as crepusculo fell, Don Tirburcio, returning, had found Consuelo and in a moment had his answer clearly, "No."

Extra candles graced the table, and a silver goblet stiffly crammed with yellow roses. The best leather-backed chairs were placed before six deep silver plates, inside which were laid, on one

side the fork, on the other the spoon. Knives were used only in the kitchen or by the hunter on the trail—such vulgarity as carving one's food at the table was unknown. Don Anabel took his place at the head of the board; Don Tiburcio followed him; Luis slipped in hastily; the ancient *abuela*, the grandmother who had come up from the country to visit her daughter, was assisted by two servants to a place of honor; and all were seated.

At once all was chattering and conversation so swift that none but the accustomed ear could have understood. Don Anabel's was not one of those establishments where the women of the family rarely if ever ate with the men. He was a cosmopolite, he averred, as he poured the red grape from the finely chased pitcher and filled the glasses for the second, or was it the third, time? Consuelo drained her goblet, but ate little. The harmless vintage deepened the color in her cheeks, brought an extra sparkle to her eyes. At the moment when she was raising the *copa* in *saludes* to her grandmother, Roman, the doddering old *moso*, appeared in the doorway with a tall figure at his back. "Here he is," mumbled Roman, and retreated just in time to escape Don Anabel's wrath at the intrusion.

Eating, drinking, and talking paused for the

moment while Don Anabel's family turned to glance politely at the visitor. He stood in the doorway, tall, reddish blond, an Americano. Loutish, dressed in soiled buckskins, a trader, perhaps only a trapper. What did the fellow want? Don Anabel rose haughtily to dispose of this unwelcome intrusion. The visitor was bowing from the waist with rather surprising good form. In excellent Spanish he inquired:

"Don Anabel Lopez? You will pardon the intrusion, I trust. I was shown in by the *moso*. I was sent by Colonel St. Vrain to inquire if we could obtain further warehouse space from you this evening. He ——"

At this point Steven's eyes were drawn, as though compelled, to the girl seated there in the mellow candlelight. She was looking at him, too. The girl, the same girl, he had seen that afternoon. She lived here, then. His heart quickened at sight of her, and he was not conscious that he stared, that he had not finished his speech. The whole scene bewildered him. After the crudities of the trail, and the primitive life at Bent's Fort he was unprepared for this luxury, this glowing, beautiful scene. Why, they did not eat from silver dishes even in New Orleans, where there were silver doorknobs in his father's house.

Don Anabel's voice came coldly, with finality.

"Colonel St. Vrain had better secure space from our amiable Viscarra. I have none available."

Steven found his tongue. "Colonel St. Vrain said to say to you, señor, that Colonel Viscarra, whom we encountered on the road just outside Santa Fe this afternoon, instructed him to get accommodations from you, stating that he knew you would, at his request, be most happy to—to make them available. Colonel Viscarra said he would not return to Santa Fe for some weeks, perhaps, as he was going down among the Indians of Texas." At this hint from the *jefe politico* of Santa Fe, Don Anabel could only bow silent assent. "Very well. If Viscarra wishes it, St. Vrain may use the space which I reserve to be at the *jefe's* disposal." He turned back to the table, but Steven refused the evident dismissal, addressing his unwilling host again.

"Señor, pardon once more if I intrude. But can you tell me aught of one Tiburcio de Garcia? I have some small business with him."

Don Tiburcio himself rose. He had taken the measure of the youth and now came forward. "Señor, I am Tiburcio Garcia, *a sus ordenes*." He looked inquiringly at the young man.

Steven again bowed and said, quietly, "Señor, might I see you later in the evening for a mo-

ment?" And lower, "I bear a message for you from Orleans."

Don Tiburcio's eyes gleamed, but his reply was inaudible to those at the table. He showed the young man out with every courtesy.

To the *bailes* of New Spain came young and old, rich and poor, peon, Indian, trapper, and the proudest Castilian blood. A long, low room—one of those in the rear of the Governor's palace, now inhabited by Colonel Viscarra—with white-washed walls and few windows, warm and crowded on this gala night of the arrival of the caravan.

The matrons in their black mantillas sat against the wall on one side of the room; the younger women sat beside them or in chattering clusters in the corners, while the young girls preened, and coquetted across the bare floor at the men and boys lounging and smoking on the other side. The music had not yet begun, but the fiddler and the mandolin-player were tuning up, and the *guitaro* was being lovingly scraped by the blind musician whose magic would set the feet of the town moving to irresistible accompaniment. Ah, that guitar! deep, full as a 'cello, that could weep, and make lovers set their wedding date on the morrow; that turned the knives of trappers to

cutting fringes and posies instead of throats and scalp locks, over cards or a girl.

Now, with a tentative last plucking of strings, suddenly it swept full into a valse, rollicking, tender, sensuous. The young men stepped forth on the floor. No introductions were necessary here. It was customary to ask whomsoever one liked. Strangely enough, the formality of Spanish etiquette laid no ban on a dance with a stranger. True, there were those, like Don Anabel Lopez, whose pride would not permit such condescension, especially when it came to Americans.

And now came Ceran St. Vrain, with the men of the caravan in his wake, and at his side a tall youth whose face was suspiciously clean shaven, even flecked with blood here and there. He wore a dark suit that caused even Luis Lopez to pause with interest and to regard with envy, though he flecked the ash from his cigarette disdainfully and folded his arms comfortably over his own scarlet-and-gold bolero, settling a crimson sash more snugly about a trim waist.

The last of the caravaners entered the hall; they spread out, and in the center appeared a girl. Blonde, Santa Maria but she was blonde! like the white gold of a sacred chalice. And her faded blue dress, over which a white silk fringed shawl was thrown, but made her fairer. The girl took

her seat beside an elderly woman who had come in with them, and looked about timidly, almost apprehensively, yet with a certain delight. It was the first dance of any kind that Hope Bragdon had ever seen. She would never have dared suggest going, but her father was occupied, Doren was already sleeping safely, and Mrs. Trenour, the only white woman then in the Villa, had persuaded her to come.

"My father will not like it, Mrs. Trenour," Hope protested, "I have never looked upon dancing, or cards, or any sinfulness. My father does not tolerate it."

"Is that possible?" Mrs. Trenour had commented, dryly. Perhaps she had her doubts on the matter. "This is different, however. Everyone goes to the *bailes* in this country. It is the only way you can see everyone. Besides, I'll tell him you had to accompany me. Haven't you anything to put over that muslin frock?"

Yes, there was a white shawl of her mother's in the bottom of her little tin trunk; and she had a right pretty piece of blue moiré ribbon to tie round her hair (it was the ribbon that first caught Consuelo's eye), in hair that at night was more silvery than gold. A woman, a blonde woman. She had heard of them, but the fairest creature she had seen up till this time was the baby of

Anita, who had married the English trapper. Its curls were flaxen yellow, its eyes blue. But no woman remained this white and gold. Consuelo gazed fascinated and a disturbing jealousy arose in her heart. So this creature had come in the caravan with the tall Americano of the ruddy hair. She had traveled with him across the plains. Was she then his sweetheart? His sister, perhaps? No, not that, she knew intuitively.

Don Tiburcio was asking for the valse. She rose in relief and they spun in dizzying circles, faster and faster, at length subsiding with the music for the march about the room. Luis was standing before the Americana's chair, bowing. Would she promenade? Evidently urged to do so by the older woman, still the girl hung back. Luis retired, flushed with fury at the rebuff. Consuelo's eyes never left the blond trader except when her back must be turned; even then she was intensely conscious of him. Did he dance? He must dance with her. Steven still stood against the far wall, looking on. Now Consuelo and Don Tiburcio were passing again before the chair of the fair-haired Americana and Don Tiburcio was looking at her, a sidelong glance. Ah, he too had noted the little blonde! As they passed on he bent to Consuelo's ear, "You are sure, señorita,

of your answer?" His voice seemed uncommonly agitated.

"Quite sure, señor," flashed Consuelo, with unexpected spirit. "Do not molest yourself to ask me again, I pray, or I may accept, and then you will not be able to promenade with the Americanita, either."

Diablo! What a little temper she had! And what *perspicaz*! Don Tiburcio stared straight ahead in his amazement and desire to disprove Consuelo's accusation. What, jealous already of another's beauty? He had scarcely glanced at the girl. Devil take it how women caught on! Consuelo was leaving him before the promenade had finished. Reaching her seat, she flounced down upon it. Now the American gentleman could come and get her. Consuelo spread her full skirts, adjusted her veil over the high comb, and sat wide-eyed, confident, smiling bright invitation across the floor at Steven Mercer. Now he could come and get her.

Ah, so that was the reason. Don Tiburcio de Garcia had a bit of pride himself. This open flouting did not soothe his vanity. *Muy bien!* With a deep ironic bow he wheeled, crossed the floor, and stood directly before the Americanita. Like a delicately tinted saint in a niche she was; sweet, remote, white and golden beyond any woman he

had ever seen. His attention was one of sheer deference and gallantry. Just as he reached her, however, the girl rose and laid her hand on the arm proffered by Steven Mercer. They moved away. The room was buzzing, for of all the flirtations brewing and sizzling at the *baile* this double one was the most conspicuous and exciting. Santa Fe was becoming used to the rough advances of the trappers, half-filled with drink, drunk with music and play and the heady response of plump señoritas with flashing eyes and teeth. Yesterday they had faced death on the Trail; tomorrow or next week they would again be claimed by mountain or desert; but tonight was playtime, dangerous playtime. There were always knifings and bull fights before a *baile* was over. Ceran St. Vrain stood near the door.

"Are you dancing any more?" he asked as Steven and Hope passed.

"Just once. With the Señorita Lopez, I hope," Steven replied. "Is there anything that you wished?"

"Don't do it. Don't do it!" warned St. Vrain in a low voice. "Stay on the safe side. And don't even promenade with Miss Bragdon any more. Young Lopez is wild. He'd knife you so easy as not. There'll be trouble before the evening's over. Remember, we don't want to land in the *carcel*."

A threat was enough to set Steven at defiance. What, not dance with whom he chose! He looked towards the spot where the *Señorita Lopez* had been sitting; he was sure she would valse with him. But the music had already struck up a wilder note and she had already risen to take the arm of a native gallant. It was a round dance playing. Steven brought Hope to her seat, and as he turned about Consuelo danced past him and stared straight past his nose without a glance of recognition. Don Tiburcio appeared at his elbow at this moment, demanding, after the manner of their world, an introduction to the American *señorita*. She laid her hand in his and he bowed over it with what English he could muster.

Consuelo, whirling by with her partner again, looked full into Steven's eyes with an expression that he could not understand. The round dance was forming, swinging up and down the hall. Steven caught a Mexican maiden and swung her, too, planning to catch Consuelo in partners' change. Consuelo came nearer; another couple to swing, and they would meet. Consuelo's heart pounded, and her outstretched hand met—that of Manuel—eager, hot, his face came unpleasantly near. Steven had dropped completely out of the dance, and all that could be seen of him was his back, disappearing through the door.

Quivering with rage, Consuelo stood still. Her hands clenched, she could have stamped her feet in fury and hurt. She would bring that American to her feet and tramp on him! But now she was caught up and swung round and round by a jovial partner, and then—the dance went out with the lights. “Some *apache emborachado* (some drunken apache),” stormed Doña Gertrudis, “unaccustomed to the entertainment of civilization.” There was roaring and laughter in the darkness, and the music of the drunken fiddler which never stopped.

Outside the dance hall Ceran St. Vrain hurried his party down a side street, halfway along which he pulled back abruptly. By the faint light of the rising moon they could see half a dozen cloaked figures hovering at the corner. St. Vrain pushed open a door and they hurried through a *zague*, out into a cluttered and used corral, thence into the other street. A few moments later they stood within the colonel's quarters, where Bragdon was waiting for his daughter. The ladies were escorted to their rooms across the courtyard, where they bid them good night.

“A close call,” said St. Vrain. “When the lights go out watch out. Luis Lopez runs the young bloods of this place, and he had his eye on

Miss Bragdon. Sorry, but if I hadn't plucked you out, Steven, my lad, you would have had a nice knife fight on your hands. And I need you to get the ladies home safely, too."

There was a light knock upon the door at this moment. The colonel laid a hand on the pistol at his hip, and blowing out the candles, stepped to the door, threw back the bolt, and opened it an inch. A solitary tall figure stood outside. It was Don Tiburcio Garcia. At St. Vrain's word he stepped quickly inside. Steven relit the candle and, the shade being drawn, the three men sat down.

"You departed just in time," remarked Don Tiburcio, smiling.

"So it seems," Steven agreed. "The colonel says there was a party lying in wait for us at the corner."

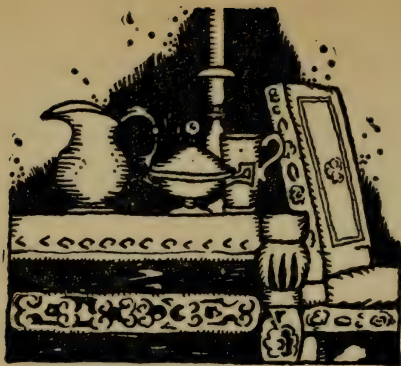
"Yes," Don Tiburcio nodded. "I saw them and took two men on the other side in case there was fighting, but our friend here was too adroit for Luis and his men."

"And the other young lady?" asked Steven.

"Her mother and a duenna escorted her safely home. Nobody would dare molest the Señorita Consuelo, anyway."

St. Vrain was pleased at this opportunity to

talk business with a Mexican gentleman of Don Tiburcio's wealth and spent an hour smoking and chatting. Then the colonel rose, remembering a mission among his mule-drivers, and Steven and Don Tiburcio were left together.



Chapter VI

DON ANABEL AND HIS FAMILY

DON ANABEL LOPEZ was proud of his station in the secure and far-flung territory of New Spain which his forbears had first found and conquered nearly three centuries before his time. He claimed descent straight from a Spanish grandee who had accompanied the expedition of settlement of Juan de Oñate in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Don Anabel felt that the riches of this vast territory belonged rightfully to those who had held it through so many generations for the glory of the Spanish crown, which at last, in this year of grace 1828, had been thrown off through a treaty of independence with her colony, Mexico.

Don Anabel's sheep grazed over a range of a hundred miles. The unnumbered buffalo were his cattle; his slaves the peons that lived upon the extensive lands granted his grandsires. To Don Anabel's warehouses the Indians brought the pelts of beaver, lynx, fox, the hides and robes

of buffalo and deer. These he exchanged with the great fur-traders of the north at a profit that would have made them wince, had they known that he himself had acquired them for a handful of tawdry merchandise and home-distilled liquors.

Every six months his caravan of burros labored up the Cordilleras from the City of Mexico, bringing all manner of merchandise for the people and for the aristocrats of New Spain. Always there were luxuries brought from Spain and from the far markets of the earth. The Mexican hidalgos prided themselves on having none but imported furniture in their establishments, but Don Anabel considered this an affectation, as it was obviously impossible for the dons of New Mexico.

Don Anabel was proud of living in a way that his Spanish forbears might have lived in that Old Spain which was so like this New Spain. His great adobe hacienda might have been considered only a vast mud house by the European, but it covered nearly an acre of ground. The patio within was fifty feet square, and if the inner walls were whitewashed instead of carved and paneled in fine woods, yet they were hung with brocades and strangely beautiful fabrics now no longer woven, which were made from the silken hair of Peruvian llamas or spun from some flax-like

Mexican plant. The carved furniture had a rude and florid beauty that was mediæval, and, like the native Aztec lords of Mexico, the proud Montezumas, Don Anabel's table was served with dishes of purest silver only.

Don Anabel was feared and respected by his servants, his tenants, and his family. Indulgent in all that made for material comfort, he exacted a deference, not only towards himself as head of the family, but among one another. He was autocrat and despot, and though his courtesy was as exquisite as that of any courtier diplomat of the outside world, his discipline was harsh; cruel even. He had never whipped his children, but had punished Luis, when he was a naughty, wilful, kicking child, in ways that made the lad subservient, secretive. For who would court a bath in the snow in winter merely to practice the dubious virtue of truthfulness? He was stoic, for who would cry when water was poured down his throat till he drowned, strangled, and his screams and throbbing head were drenched to shuddering, smothered sobs.

Perhaps the example of Indian discipline had had its effect on Don Anabel, although towards his small daughter he practiced no such heroic measures. Yet they were not necessary. Fear of her father's displeasure was sufficient to still one

of Consuelo's tantrums. His solemn entrance upon the scene of biting, scratching, shrieking, spitting, and other infantile atrocities was enough to secure trembling silence, proper behavior, and the obedient reception of oil of the castor bean, or whatever else it was that aroused Consuelo's displeasure and her violent *disgusto*.

Doña Gertrudis de Chaves y Lopez was exactly the wife for Don Anabel. Her pansy-like beauty when she had come to the hacienda as a bride of sixteen was never marred by tempests. She bloomed, had eight babies, only two of which lived, and grew fat, all without ever questioning her husband's authority. In her own domain she grew highly excited on important domestic occasions, such as involved the vast responsibility of perfectly bleached sheets, properly seasoned enchiladas, and claret with the venison if the archbishop came to dinner.

It was thought due to her common origin that she molested herself with such things, and Doña Gertrudis made a great pretense of never stepping within the kitchen—save us, no! For there were those who said that Doña Gertrudis was not of pure Spanish blood; that her grandmother had been Aztecan, descended from an Aztec lord. You could see for yourself that her hair was not fine and wispy like Don Anabel's, but heavy, coarse,

though lustrous. But no breath of that! Doña Gertrudis was most devout and her devotions occupied a large part of her time. She did, indeed, a great deal of secret good, and followed often behind Don Anabel's visits to his ranchos with a soft touch to smooth the sternly dispensed justice.

If Don Anabel's word was law within his own home, his influence extended no less outside his estates. His father had been a governor of New Mexico, and Don Anabel's word carried great weight with the successive *jefe políticos* of the territory of New Mexico. Chihuahua, the seat of government of this province, of which Santa Fe was the chief city, numbering as it did a thousand souls, was three months' travel to the south. The capital of Mexico was more than nine hundred leagues to the south. Little did the President of the new republic interfere with the overlordship of the *jefe politico* of the northern territory. At one time Mexican officials had intervened jealously over the intrusion of venturesome Yankees from beyond the mountains, who came exploring and were followed by trains of fresh traders.

They dared to bring in from eastward the goods that Mexico had always supplied to the farthermost parts of New Spain. The luckless ones had been thrown into prison, had languished in Chi-

huahua jails for a decade, but as soon as they returned to their northern homes it was but to send more and more pack animals back across the deserts.

Don Anabel himself had from the first resented these intruders bitterly. To him the white men from across the plains were still colonists of the hereditarily hated English. They were thrown into the *carcel*, hindered in every way, yet still they came! And in the end Don Anabel traded with them, as every one else did. It was to his advantage. He could not afford not to.

On the morning after this last invasion Don Anabel, straight, forbidding, stood in his warehouse, taking stock not only of merchandise, but of things in general. Luis, a trifle nervous, but much quicker than usual to anticipate his father's moods and requests, stood by with pencil and pad, while the clerks ran hither and thither.

"And ten bolts of the cotton cloth, with but two more of the linen," concluded Don Anabel. "They are an ill-mannered lot," he resumed his grievance, "bursting into a gentleman's house while he is at dinner with his family. Turning the dances into low brawls. El Coronel St. Vrain is the only one with any measure of dignity or discretion."

"Discreet indeed," murmured Luis, sarcas-

tically. "We had better hurry if we are to get the best of the goods."

"And your mother tells me that while she was at the *baile* another piece of silver disappeared from the cupboard. You remember that the last time a caravan arrived the same thing happened. I'll shoot the next sneaking *ladron* I lay my hands on."

"It is terrible," assented Luis, unmoved, as he checked over the bolts of cloth. "Well, shall we go on to the trading?"

They left the warehouse in charge of an overseer and walked down the crooked street, crossed the bridge below which the Santa Fe River flowed, a sparkling racing little stream, and after several turns came to the plaza. There in a large bodega the caravaners had set out their goods. In a short while business would begin. Luis' eyes searched the Americans assembled in the bodega. Colonel St. Vrain, his young friend, Steven Mercer, Bragdon, a small boy who was the brother of the fair-haired girl—ah, the sister had not come, then. Just as well. He would contrive better opportunities to see this disdainful *exquisita*.

The traders were spreading out their merchandise on the long low tables that served for counters. Several of them were disposing of their

goods outside, from the wagons, which were surrounded by Pueblo Indians from Tesuque, above Santa Fe, from Taos, and from the pueblos down upon the Rio Grande. Silver exchanged hands rapidly within the bodega, while outside furs and supple deer hides were bartered for the manufactured articles coveted by the Indians.

Bragdon had already disposed outside of the wagonful of goods which he had acquired on the Trail through the death of the two New England traders. He had earrings, rope, paint, cheap knives and good knives, liquor, and sugar. He had increased the amount of his whisky by diluting a gallon at least one half, and obtaining for the diluted pints a buffalo hide each, or the equivalent in the nearer pelts of the Rockies. The sugar had been amplified by a method all his own and appeared to satisfy the unaccustomed palate of the Indian just as well as the purer product. Bragdon worked quickly and had as quickly retired into the bodega, where he was now ready to dispose of his higher-grade goods.

A line of nankeen trousers was interesting the young men of the town. They sold out rapidly, and the majority were donned at once. Bragdon's shoes did not meet with approval, however, and Luis scornfully laid down the pair he had been considering when he had discovered that they

were neither rights nor lefts, but straight lasts, to be worn on either foot.

"What! These are not *de modo*. Does he think we know nothing here?" Bragdon was much taken aback, but later was able to convince other purchasers of the advantages of the good old-fashioned shoe that would go on either foot. His snipe toes, Bonapartes, goose-and-ganders, Swiss hunting, were soon disposed of. And then came Bragdon's prize. He opened a case in which were numerous small boxes. Opening one, he extracted a sliver of wood tipped with a yellow and blue substance. Calling attention to what he was about to do, he struck the small stick upon a wall and immediately it flamed, burning like a tiny taper with a full flame, and emitting a sulphurous odor. Bragdon set the flame to his pipe, puffed in, and lit it; then taking a cigarette from the hand of the astonished Steven, he lit that too before the flame flickered and died out, having consumed the small stick.

"*Diablo!* What is it?" The Santa Feans went wild.

"Matches," said Bragdon, "they are called; a new thing, just discovered in England last year. I have with me here some of the very first packet brought into the United States. You will see

that they are phosphorescent?" he held up one proudly.

"*Fosforo!*" shouted some one, and the name stuck. Everyone gathered round to see the miracle. Fire in a minute. No scratching of flintlocks, no need of burning glasses.

"*Por mi vida* (By my life)," said St. Vrain to Steven, "it is a pity that he could not have produced one of those little boxes that wet night when we could not strike flint or rub a stick to heat a bit of broth for his own young. *Sacré!*"

The packages went like tortillas, and Bragdon had at length to admit that there were no more. Don Anabel was himself enormously interested, and pleased, too, with this new fancy, though it was his opinion that the things were not in the least practical and would never be of much real use or value.

It was annoying, but he had to pay the tall youth, who was again thrust upon him by St. Vrain, at the rate of four dollars a yard for the two bolts of linen which he decided to take, and in the end he was induced also to buy for his own use and for the use of Doña Gertrudis a piece of cloth, a fine black it was, at twenty dollars the yard. Luis did a good piece of work here in forcing the American down a dollar a yard. This exertion was not at all distasteful to Luis. It

appealed to the gaming instinct which every youth of Mexico or New Spain had.

St. Vrain, on the other hand, had been forced that morning to pay thirty dollars apiece for the ten mules which he was taking back to Taos with him, where he and Charles Bent would need them in conducting their branch of the trade that had grown up about Bent's Fort. Salt at five dollars a load was not difficult to dispose of, although any New Mexican could haul it himself from various places for even less than that amount. St. Vrain showed Steven a pretty little mare which he bought at once for eleven dollars and of which he at once became very fond.

By noon everyone was ready to stop. A good deal remained to be disposed of, and yet an extremely good business had been done. "I do not mind paying thirty dollars for the mules," St. Vrain confided to Steven, as he locked his warehouse door behind him, "as long as I am not forced to buy back my own mules as those poor chaps did last year. Not four days from La Villa their mules were all stampeded off, nearly three hundred of them, and, having been forced to return to Santa Fe on foot to purchase more, they were offered their own animals and had to buy them back. And they are not nearly so good, either, these mules of New Mexico, as your large

Louisiana jackass. Did you notice that Bragdon had six of his mules die in harness just as they reached the end of the Trail?"

"No wonder, with the load he carried and the way he pushed them."

"Trade is not nearly so good this year as it was last," St. Vrain considered. "It's due to such treatment here in Santa Fe and to the terrible ferocity of the Indians. Why, last year there were a hundred wagons to the thirty of this summer. The amount of merchandise brought in and the business done was more than three times as much as for this summer."

They were walking up the narrow street and Steven now was getting his first real glimpse of Santa Fe. There were no sidewalks and the walls of the houses rose straight from the road. There were occasional glimpses into green patios, and fragrant sprays of deep pink tamarack drooped occasionally over the walls, waving their plumes against a very blue sky. When it wished, the reserve of Old Spain was well housed behind those shuttered windows and crooked little doors. Yet when so disposed it could overflow merrily into the street, or peer intimately from windows through which a hand could thrust to pluck at one's cloak as he passed, to pick one's pocket, or to drop a note within the hand.

One may imagine Steven's surprise to feel a crumpled piece of paper come into contact with his palm. He closed his finger upon the fragment and looked swiftly down. But only the barred shutters of a little blue window were there, and he walked on with scarcely a halt in his stride.

"Indeed!" he replied to the colonel, politely, and answered intelligently upon matters of the trade until they reached the house, where the colonel went to see that lunch was forthcoming at once, before siesta. Then Steven opened his hand and spread out the crumpled paper, half foolishly, half expectantly. Was it from Don Tiburcio de Garcia?

In a fine, painstaking script the note ran thus:

SEÑOR ESTEVAN MERCER: Will you not come below the *balcon* where first we met yesterday, at the tenth hour tonight? I should esteem it a favor, as I have a word for your safety.

CONSUELO LUCERO LOPEZ Y CHAVEZ.

Steven was looking for intrigue. But political, not the intrigue of lovely ladies. Still, pleased and puzzled, he revolved the matter in his mind for a moment. Ceran St. Vrain had warned him against girls, this girl in particular. Colonel Bent had warned him against political entanglements. And here he was getting nicely tied up in both,

it seemed. For of course he would be beneath the *balcon* at the stroke of ten. Oh well, time enough yet. Here he was, and he hadn't done anything, so far. He'd been forced to slight the señorita the night before, and not of his own accord or liking, either. He must make apology for that, in any event. A wonder she would bother about him at all.

Steven's modesty was not greater than that of the average decent youth, perhaps, yet to tell the truth, as he was unfamiliar with the manners of this new old world, he had not realized that Consuelo was indicating any special favor for him by her actions of the night before. He had seen her twice before that day, and she was smiling at him in pleasant recognition. He had already asked Hope Bragdon to promenade. In New Orleans he had been well schooled in the proper thing to do. Well, at all events, he would be under that balcony at ten.

Had Consuelo been able to know of that decision it would have saved her much suspense. Relegated to her room for the day, she was in disgrace. Yet it was a relief to be there, away from the incessant agitation of Doña Gertrudis' tongue. Scarcely had the wavering candles been relit in the dance hall the night before when Doña Gertrudis, sweeping her daughter before her, and

surrounded by their elderly neighbors and their cousins and their aunts, poured out of the place and down the street, *duennas* and *muchachas*, chaperons and girls. While some were frightened and many were elated, they themselves were in reality in no danger. The indignant clatter of Doña Gertrudis' tongue would have caused every drunken trapper or jovial Spaniard to give her a wide berth. When they had reached their own home she poured out her indignation again to Don Anabel.

Imagine, Consuelo, ungrateful daughter of no consideration, had again this night insulted such a noble gentleman as Don Tiburcio. "*Si!* I saw with my own eyes." And moreover, she had smiled openly at the *Americano*, the very trader who had been at their house that same night. At the first of these charges Don Anabel became very stern and dignified. At the second he flew into a fiery rage.

"I will myself have this young scoundrel thrown into jail," he stormed.

"But what for, papa?" Consuelo protested, aghast at the storm her behaviour had evoked. No matter. She should keep to her room the whole of the following day and learn better how to conduct herself with her inferiors. And so she had, alternating between regret and fury that

the ruddy-haired trader had not danced with her. Shortly before noon the faded and faithful Felicita came tiptoeing in, to report all the news. After recounting the events of the morning's trading, what her father had bought, and how the father of the blonde girl had made fire with naught but a tiny splinter (and she knew, therefore, that he must indeed be in league with the devil), Felicita's pock-marked face blanched at this, she whispered, "The *caballero*, the young gentleman who stopped beneath the balcony yesterday afternoon—your brother Señor Luis, has threatened that if that one does not abandon the white girl he, Don Luis, will attend to the Yanqui's funeral himself.

"Yes, and even Don Tiburcio, señorita, is enchanted, they say, by the fair-haired American, and followed the merchants to their house last night. Surely there will be trouble for the handsome lad." Felicita sighed, for, though old at thirty, romance had not departed from her, and when peeping over the window ledge the day before, she had seen the youth stop, look up and smile at her mistress—as who did not—and bid her good afternoon.

Consuelo's rage against Estevan Mercer, if that was what they called him, melted into a swift flow of concern. How terrible! She had brought

all this upon him. This was a pleasanter thought than that he had brought it upon himself or that Luis was merely visiting his wrath upon Stevan.

"What will Luis do, Felicita?" Consuelo barely breathed the question.

"He will shoot or knife him, señorita, the first time he catches him out at night."

"Oh, I must tell Don Estevan! Where is the American now, Felicita? At the warehouse? Good! good! Quick, Felicita! Give me pencil and paper." Felicita flew; her young mistress was educated, she could write. This was important.

Consuelo wrote, folded a tiny missive, thrust it into Felicita's hands. "Here, run with it to the house of my aunt Juana on the street leading from the bodega to the house of Doña Katarina. See if you cannot catch him if he passes that way. I must warn him." She pushed the willing Felicita out the door just as Doña Gertrudis' step was heard coming in. Consuelo flew to the bed, and when Doña Gertrudis entered was lying with her head pillowed on her arm, fast asleep.

Siesta; and a long afternoon that dragged through hot, golden hours. Later, in the garden, when there was no trading for the day, Don Anabel sat with Don Tiburcio, drinking a bottle

of berry wine that had been cooling in the acequia since that morning.

"It is extraordinary, the amount of goods that those Yanquis pulled out of their wagons this morning," said Don Tiburcio. "It is incredible, actually. I should have judged that a wagon could have carried but half the amount. But it is to our advantage. Both in the quantity of the useful goods that they bring and in the quality. Competition is invariably a great spur to trade, Don Anabel."

"Perhaps, as you say, this trade with the Yanquis stimulates our business," Don Anabel conceded, reluctantly, "but it has many other aspects that are undesirable."

"Yes, it has," agreed Don Tiburcio, thinking of Steven Mercer and the American girl. Was she in love with her countryman? He thought not. She seemed to be in love with no one. She was a saint, as delicately tinted as plaster, and as cold, perhaps as hard. He was fascinated; caught on the rebound of his emotions. He realized it. Was he always to love the unattainable? Don Anabel was talking on.

"I have never seen such a vast amount of goods produced as from those wagons. They have already taken in a great deal of silver. But there will be sizable duties upon it, so they will not

have the clear profit they look for. Instead of repelling this growing trade and discouraging it," Don Anabel was arguing, "Colonel Viscarra is doing everything to protect the traders. He himself escorted Colonel Bent's party from the border to the Fort, and but just missed coming back with this caravan. He has dashed off now to put down a border warfare with the Texans and the Crees. Texas has been claiming, as you know, that the southern route of the Santa Fe Trail lies through her territory. She demands the right of *arancel*, the return-trip duties, instead of Santa Fe." This seemed to annoy Don Anabel exceedingly, though he'd have admitted no inconsistency in his attitude.

"I think Viscarra has the right policy," replied Don Tiburcio, suavely. "We shall have to come to rely to a certain extent upon American trade. The old opposition that the traders were sent as spies upon our government has been shown to be without foundation."

"I do not know," replied Don Anabel, quickly; "certainly they were looking into the country and the possibilities of trade. La Lande would have gone back, only he found he could prosper here, and as the goods with which he set himself up in business here did not belong to him, but to his employer back on the Missouri River, he would

have had to make an accounting had he returned. Pursley—well, we all want to make Pursley's stay agreeable; or his departure formidable, rather."

"Don Anabel laughed a frankly cynical laugh. He came here, you may remember, as an emissary. Was one of a thousand men who first crossed our northern Andes, with two thousand animals. In Pursley's pockets were nuggets of pure gold. He alone knew exactly where he had picked them up. That tale returned across the Trail. But Pursley remains here.

"The question is," Don Anabel resumed, after a moment's sipping of his cordial, "to whom does this country belong? To us, the Spaniards who have held it for three centuries, ever since Cabeza de Baca first found it, or to these upstart colonials who have been free from England's skirts for hardly half a century? Santa Fe is not large. She is remote from Mexico—and its political storms"—Don Tiburcio winced—"and for that very reason little able to withstand a horde of Yanquis coming like bull-headed buffalo over the Trail. The more you kill, the more there are, apparently. Will Mexico fight for us, or is she no longer Spanish? Has she thrown off the traditions of Spain along with the yoke of Spain?"

"I do not know," Don Tiburcio replied, slowly.

"Last winter Mexico expelled all the Cachupines. Every Spanish-born citizen, including the friars, even, and drove out Gomez Pedraza, the first President they had been able to elect constitutionally. That," he concluded, dryly, "in connection with our treaty of independence of January last year, might be construed as a severing of identity with Spain, and the development of a national identity."

"National disintegration," declared Don Anabel. "Mexico was never united until Cortez came. A handful of scattered tribes that even the great Montezuma did not pretend to keep together. Spain's imprint will never depart, no matter how much you throw off the 'yoke.' This whole country is New Spain."

"Yet one day I think you will find that you, too, will be throwing off Mexico; allegiance is more geographic than of blood. Your capital may be eastward in another century."

"No," said Don Anabel, violently. "New Mexico this territory has been since Antonio de Espejo named us in 1583; Santa Fe has been the seat of government since sixteen five, and so shall they always be. Our boundaries began at New Galicia, and extended to New Biscay, and they shall never retreat so far as I can help it."

"Señor," replied Don Tiburcio, with frank ad-

miration of the older man in his eyes, "you may be mistaken, but you are admirable, señor."

Don Tiburcio was relieved not to see Consuelo at dinner that night. Dinner was a quiet affair, with Doña Gertrudis much subdued, Luis abstracted. Don Tiburcio could not like Luis wholly, but there was a certain careless gayety and deference about the boy that was most charming. The family separated immediately after the meal and Don Tiburcio departed up the street where Ceran St. Vrain was lodging; Luis disappeared; and Doña Gertrudis went to see if her poor little Consuelo had eaten her supper, and found her already in bed, so retired herself. *Valga-me!* it was ten minutes to ten o'clock.

No sooner had her mother departed than Consuelo leaped from her bed, patted the bolster into her own place, pulling the covers up deftly over it. She snatched her shoes from under the bed, flung a white lace scarf over her tumbled hair, and tiptoed through the door at the opposite end of the room, across the room of the sleeping grandmother, into another chamber, unoccupied, and beyond to Felicita's room. There stood her slave, shivering with excitement, and steadied a chair while Consuelo mounted to the *balcon*,

where she crouched, peering between the crudely turned bars.

A yellow harvest moon was just rising over the Sangre de Cristo. Before long its radiance would flood the quiet street. Now it gave but a slight glow. The street below was empty. Consuelo's heart thumped so loudly that at first she thought it the beat of a horse's hoofs on the road. *Dios!* If he did not come. It would be simply not to be supported! She held her breath in an agony of listening. Not a sound, not a footfall, not a breath stirring. Desperately she peered over the railing. He was there, below the *balcon*, close to the wall. Imagine!

She rose bravely and leaned over. "Señor, I thank you for coming. I wished to tell you that you are in danger, señor."

"It does not matter, señorita. It would be worth it to see you." Was this he, Steven Mercer, talking? *Maman* would quite approve of his pretty speeches.

"Ah, but not just this moment. I mean all the while, señor, when you may be abroad at night. For that reason I wished to warn you. Do not go unarmed at night, nor to out-of-the-way places by day, I beg of you." She was pleading so earnestly that Steven looked up in surprise, at once serious.

"Have you heard anyone threatening me, Señorita Lopez?" he asked.

"Oh, I have heard of threats. My brother Luis he threatens because you danced with the fair girl last night and she would not walk with him. He thinks—you are in love with her, señor? ——"

"And would it be his affair if I were?" replied Steven, with a trace of asperity. "But I am not, señorita. She is my countrywoman, and I am bound to protect her and be courteous to her. That is all."

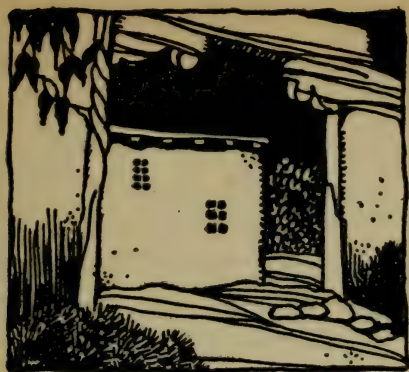
"I am glad for that." There was no doubting the sighing voice from the balcony, "but that is not all, Señor Estevan. You are American, and must be very discreet here in Santa Fe. It would be awful to have bloodshed. Although I suppose you are used to that."

"Oh yes, more or less," replied Steven, modestly. "The mosquitoes on the Trail were frightful. I lost simply quarts to them."

Consuelo looked startled. Felicita was pulling at her skirts from below. "I must go, señor. I may be discovered." She was peering over the rail at him, and all he could see was her eyes and nose. A wave of genuine gratitude, of pleasure, of moonlight and youth, swept Steven up to the rail. Pulling himself up on a level with it, he

implanted a kiss on the small fingers clutching there. But somehow the kiss landed instead on a nose.

With a little gasp Consuelo dropped out of sight. Steven slipped to the ground, leaped to the dark side of the street, and, for a novice, lost himself very successfully in the shadows just as the moon escaped fully from the mountains.



Chapter VII
THE PIONEERS

LIFE had altered greatly for Hope Bragdon since that far-away day when her father had decided that they would cross the plains in a Conestoga wagon. That crossing seemed now like a dusty nightmare. Hope did not like to think back to it, but rather to accustom herself to the new life here in the Villa de Santa Fe.

Sometimes it seemed that life had just begun for her that night at the dance. No one had ever paid much attention to her back home in Pottsville. She had never seen so much of gayety as during that one crowded hour. Hope would have liked to know the lovely-looking Spanish girl whom she had seen on the night of the dance, but she did not see Consuelo again during the weeks that followed. On the day following the dance Bragdon moved out to a house just outside of town.

How different these thick-walled houses, made from the very earth beneath one's feet, from the cold frame and brick of her New England home. Cool in the heat of the day, warm in the cool of the evening, they were amazingly comfortable. How different, too, the life—easier for the natives, easier even for her, daughter of a Yankee, born to look for work. There was water in the well, there were no forests to be hewn, no fields to clear before they had grain; crops never failed if they were irrigated, it seemed.

Theirs were not the usual problems of the pioneer. This land had been lived in for centuries, and the leisurely ways of ancient peoples rested strangely upon her. Mrs. Trenour was very kind. The Mexican women were kind. Even the Indian women of the pueblos were friendly and brought her soft deerskin moccasins, ground corn meal, and beautiful autumn vegetables—as much as they could carry in exchange for a cupful of white sugar. No matter what Hope gave them as a gift, they always brought back more in return. As soon as he heard of it, however, Bragdon put a stop to Hope's little attempts to requite their gifts. This did not accord with his idea of thrift and business. What were they there for, in this God-forsaken country, as he called it, if not to make a good profit?

Doren, who was recovering but slowly from the hardships of the long overland journey, was helping his father pick grapes in the sun. The sunshine was good for him, his father said, but Hope brought him into the house upon various pretexts to let him rest, as the heat tired him after a few hours.

James Bragdon had not sold out his entire stock. He still had some of the extra merchandise which fell to him when the goods of the men killed on the trail was divided among their fellows. He had disposed of his own more quickly than any of the other traders. Hope was surprised to find that he still had some bolts of bright gingham and a number of boxes of other things put away in the extra room at the end of the house. She said nothing, as she had learned from experience not to question her father. On the third night of their stay in the new house Hope sat alone on the doorstep, watching the moon rise over the mountains. Doren lay asleep inside; her father had gone into town to talk with the traders.

A rider drew up before the house, dismounted, and came toward her, bowing. It was the young man whom she had seen at the by-lee, who had asked her to dance when she could not. "Good evening, señorita," he said, softly. She under-

stood that much, and replied, "*Buenas noches*, señor," a trifle timidly, yet deciding that to speak without introductions must be the custom of this country.

"May I sit down?" asked Luis, in his pleasant, suave voice, indicating a place beside her. She rose to bring out chairs, but, laughing, he seated himself on a low stone. The moon rose well above the treetops and the young Spanish gentleman looked with something of awe upon the aureole of silver fair hair surrounding the girl's head. Never had he seen a girl like her. He would not have dared to touch her. She roused all that was best in his nature—and all that was worst, too, struggling passionately in the depths of his being. Everything he had ever wanted he had had without any difficulty, and now that he had outgrown the wants which his doting mother could supply, he *took* what he wanted, if it were not forthcoming. No girl had ever flouted him. Was he not the young Don Luis Lopez, heir to Don Anabel himself?

So there was certainty behind his considered wooing that glamorous night. He must not frighten this silver flower; indeed, he did not want to.

He longed passionately to have Hope like him, and tried to amuse her with his broken bits of

English. "You-are-jung-and-lowbely," he said, carefully. She laughed when she saw that it did not hurt his feelings, and tried to follow the few words of Spanish which he repeated for her. Then she grew frightened at this unusual visit and for fear her father would return. Luis, too, felt he had stayed as long as he dared, and rose reluctantly to go. He wheeled his pony in the moonlight with a fine display of horsemanship, and after caracolling around the plazita before the house, swept off into the moonlight at a gallop.

Just in time, for James Bragdon came back along the same street within a few minutes. "I have bought this house," he said, "and am going to take up some land, adjoining. I can make a trade for it and get it cheap, for the title is not clear. Then we shall have no rent to pay and we can raise our own garden stuff next year. We are right on the big ditch, and there is a little river yonder, a stream from the Tesuque."

The next day he was watering his new possessions, having shut down the headgate below in the "sakey," and the muddy water had already run over his field when an irate Mexican followed by two others came posthaste through the fields, gesticulating and threatening. Bragdon realized that he was in trouble and made no objection when

they opened the gates in the ditch below him and went off muttering to shut the water off from his ditch above.

Ceran St. Vrain endeavored to explain to the Yankee, that afternoon, that the rules of irrigating in that country were sacred and that only the master of the *acequias* could say when to open the gates and when not, and where the water was to be distributed. He warned him not to use water until permitted. "But his crops he had bought in the land needed it," protested the man, indignantly. That might be, St. Vrain conceded, but they knew best what could be used, and it was possible that Bragdon's place had no right to that water.

Bragdon that night sat outside his door, himself, and seeing some young man riding past he ordered his daughter within the house, although the night was glorious. So Luis had no such fortunate meeting with the girl that night.

Hope was disappointed, for she had hoped that perhaps the dark handsome boy would come back to amuse her and teach her some more Spanish. Mrs. Trenour was going up to Taos the next morning with Colonel St. Vrain to meet her husband, and Hope would be left alone except for Doren. A number of black-shawled Mexican women had come in to see her that morning and

had talked rapidly and made polite-sounding expressions which she could not in the least understand. Had she but known it they were telling her about the water, warning her that her papa must not take it, that it was not his, that at this time of the year it belonged indeed to the Indians of the Tesuque pueblo above them. One of the women brought an earthen jar filled with *tortillas*, wrapped in a clean white cloth. This Hope could understand, and smiled one of her rare but sweet smiles in gratitude. They got along famously after that, and when the women left, each took Hope by the shoulders and laid her left cheek against the girl's in farewell.

Hope was thinking of this with pleasure as she sat watching the moon riding high over the mountains. It was all very strange to this Puritan girl. And yet her changed surroundings did not affect her as much as they would have affected most people. Hope lived an inner life that was inarticulate, that had built up a defensive barrier against the disappointments of a rigorous upbringing, and that was moved only by what happened to Doren. And by the memory of her tender, silent mother, who had put the tiny baby brother into her arms when she was dying, having the little girl promise always to take care of him.

Hope had no idea of being beautiful in the eyes

of this new world, nor of the excitement of which she had been the cause on the night of the *baile*. But her father had heard of it through the traders next day, and through St. Vrain. He was furious and swore that no Greaser rakes should annoy his girl. Hope had been asleep for some time when a soft strain of music crept upon her consciousness, again and again, a repeated strain. She sprung to her feet and crept toward the window. Never before in her life had she been serenaded, yet she knew that that was what this must be; that this music was for her. A man's voice was singing. She caught the words that Luis had been trying to teach her the night before.

“Oh, Anita, *como te amo, a ti*, ——”

But before the copleta could be finished there was a burst of profanity from the front door of the house, and James Bragdon with a gun, shouting and loosing his powerful mongrel dog, half wolf from the plains, at the serenader, who perforce took to his heels. Leaping to the horse tethered somewhere out of sight, the serenader made his escape in a volley of flying hoofs that grew fainter and fainter and died away.

The girl, listening nervously behind the curtains, heard her father say: “Well, I guess that

will be the end of him. I'll be troubled with him no more."

But to Luis the indignity of such an ignominious rout was a never-to-be-forgotten insult. Frustrated, he strode his room in such a fury as he had never before felt himself possessed of. His handsome young face was suffused with blood, his ordinarily weak mouth drawn into a straight hard line. He looked into the mirror as he passed and saw that his white shirt was covered with the muddy footprints of Bragdon's dog, which had run over the freshly irrigated fields. With shaking hand Luis brushed off the dirt and fastidiously flecked his beautiful light cloth trousers.

"I will finish that cur of a Yankee," he swore. He waited till he heard Don Anabel complete his rounds of the casa, locking every door or bolting it. When the house was quiet once more Luis slipped out through the window and away to his familiars.

Steven rode out to Bragdon's house the next afternoon. He thought that Hope might be lonely, now that Mrs. Trenour was leaving for Taos, and he had not yet called upon the Bragdons in their new home. Hope was very much pleased, but she greeted the young man somewhat nervously, looking at her father to see what his re-

ception of their caller would be. James Bragdon, however, was most cordial. He held Steven a long time talking business.

"I should think that you could persuade your father, with his great wealth and vast business interests," he said, ingratiatingly, "to send out a caravan. If he would outfit you for a trip every six months I would gladly be your agent at this end of the line and handle all your business."

"If I arrived alive," said Steven, with grim humor. "But what makes you think my father has such vast interests?"

Oh, St. Vrain had told him, and everyone knew of Mercer & Co. of New Orleans. Well, his father would have to be the judge of his business ventures; Steven could only report conditions to him. It was already getting dark, the days were growing shorter, when at last Steven was able to break away. It was with a feeling of relief that he pressed his heels against the mare's flanks as she raced down the road, past low pines and cedars. Something struck Steven across the chest, knocking his breath clear out of him. He was swept from his mare and fell heavily to the road, his head striking a rock so that consciousness went out with a blaze of starry glory. The mare ran on from sheer momentum, slowing up in a few paces and coming to a standstill; a good little

beast. Then she returned and stood patiently for a while beside the form on the road. It did not move, and after a while she trotted along in the direction in which she was turned, back over the road, to the place where she had been tethered before Bragdon's door, and stood there.

Bragdon, seated in the doorway, looked with surprise at the mare, rose, and went over to her. Why, it was Steven Mercer's horse! Had she run away? Could he have been thrown? At any rate, he would want her back again. Well, let him come and get her. A not too friendly young puppy, anyway. But then, he was the son of a great merchant; and business must be cultivated. Bragdon took the mare's bridle in his hand and walked along the road.

He was rather pleased than not when he came upon Steven, that is, after he had ascertained that the boy's heart was still beating. He would be putting Steven in his debt. He lifted the inert figure with difficulty into the saddle and, mounting behind, walked the mare back to his casa. He carried the boy in and called Hope. "Some one has it in for him. There was rope tied between trees chest-high across the road; a narrow place between two trees. Guess he never knew what hit him, in the dark and all."

Steven came to himself painfully, with a split-

ting head, to find a fair, anxious face bending over him. Strange, somehow he had expected a dark, piquante, young person to be there, though he could not imagine why. There was a painfully sprained arm, and Hope was surprising clever at binding it to ease the hurt. They made him a fresh bed in a spare room and Hope and her father helped him in. He was glad to be allowed to lie quietly. A rope stretched across the road, eh? Who could have done it, and was it intended for him?

He pondered this the next afternoon as he rode slowly back to his quarters. He was still staying in Colonel St. Vrain's place, and boarding with Mrs. Trenour's sister-in-law, a capable and friendly Spanish lady with a handsome past, though she was not yet forty. The señora shook her head when Steven came in.

"Why are you staying, señor?" she asked. "You can stay in Taos with Ceran St. Vrain until the traders' caravan returns next week."

"But I am not going back on this trip, señora," he replied. "I have no reason to go, and several reasons for staying, as well as that I want to. I would, if I returned to New Orleans for goods to trade, have to convince my parents and persuade them to my return—a difficult thing—and there is no wagonful of goods on hand at West-

port Landing. No, I am sending messages to my father, of my safety and my hope that he will now see fit to enter into a half partnership with me"—the lad had the grace to smile—"he supplying the goods, and I ——"

"And you your life," snorted the good Spanish lady. "Fair enough. Well, I am glad we are not to lose you so soon."

"You may at that, if I get any more such traps set for me as that of last night," Steven replied. "Well, I think I shall get a good night's rest, for this head gave me little sleep last night, and my arm did not enjoy the trotting of my mare on the way back here." The Señora Katarina brought him a bowl of soup rich with chili and ground meat balls, and with this warming his ribs, he stretched himself gratefully between cooling sheets, thinking what a hard lot the poor girl Hope had, and wondering how he should manage to see Señorita Consuelo again. She had been right; he *was* in danger, apparently. And she had run the risk of letting him know—he must show her that—that he appreciated—that he appreciated— Steven was asleep.

He woke some time later because a light was shining right into his eyes and a hard hand was shaking his shoulder. He struggled to throw off the heavy slumber into which he had sunk. A

bearded Mexican hung over him, a man he had never seen before. Behind this man stood two other Mexicans, and behind them he could see the agitated face of Señora Katarina. What was it all about?

He would soon learn. He was under arrest. Get up, get his clothes on, and exchange these quarters for the *carcel*. But what for? With what was he charged? That was all right. He would know soon enough. The young Mexican standing in the background threw back his serape and indicated an emblem of authority on his chest. Steven was handicapped with his wrenched left arm, and besides, there were three of them and another outside. Best go along now, he decided reluctantly, and see what happened. And so when he had pulled on his clothes they filed down the dark and crooked little street and came at length to the jail, a stupid low building no whit different outside from the corral beside it or the houses about it, except that there were no windows at all on the street, only the door, which was strongly barred after them as they entered.

But the "cell" into which he was thrown—for the jailer booted him in from behind and closed the door so quickly that Steven had no chance to make his protests felt—that was different indeed from the room he had just left. Pitch dark, not

a window in it as far as he could judge, close and filthy. He scarcely dared stir, but, his hand encountering a small stick, he scraped away at the dirt floor until he had cleared a place large enough to lie down upon. Probably just as well he couldn't see, he consoled himself, and then proceeded to get what slumber he could, execrating himself, meanwhile, for having disregarded the wise advice of Colonel Bent certainly as regarding politics.

"De Garcia is responsible for this," he thought. "I should not have believed it of him. I should have thought he was genuine, a gentleman of his word."

But Steven was wrong. Don Tiburcio de Garcia had gone to Taos several days before to see Charles Bent. Had Don Tiburcio remained in Santa Fe all that happened might have been quite different. Luis Lopez had ways of knowing many things. His followers were numerous and swift to report whatever they thought might concern him. That is how he knew that Steven Mercer had not broken his neck by that swift fall from the horse—a simple device, the stretched rope, but one which is often successful—but, to the contrary, had been carried back to the house of James Bragdon. The result was that Luis went wild with jealousy and proceeded, after some

thought and a little more information from the outside, straight to his father. He talked with him for some time. Don Anabel was a ready listener.

"But how do you know that this American is a spy," he asked, "and what proof have you that he is arranging to ship arms into New Mexico for an insurrection, or to take Santa Fe, as you say?"

"This," replied Luis, triumphantly. "He comes first with no merchandise of his own at all. He is no *mercader*."

"He sold me cloth for twenty duros," put in Don Anabel, skeptically.

"*Esta bien*. He sold only for Colonel St. Vrain, as a blind. But he sends back way to New Orleans for a shipment of two thousand *pistoles*, *entiende Ud.*, Señor? two thousand pistols, of the new kind, he specifies, whatever they may be; revolver, to turn around, he writes."

"How do you know this?" Don Anabel turned a shade paler under his fine brown skin and leaned tensely forward.

"Because the letter which he intrusted to one of the traders who left here five days ago, and which was to have been carried to Fort Leavenworth and from there sent down the Great River somehow to the father of the boy, a *mercader*

himself, says so. Here it is." He spread on the table before his father a folded paper that he had drawn from his sash.

"How did you come into possession of this letter?" asked Don Anabel, after he had read it.

"Well, frankly, it was brought to me by one of my *arrieros* who accompanied the returning caravan part way on the Trail."

"You mean he held it up?" demanded Don Anabel. "At your orders?"

Luis nodded. "I suspected the Yankees, señor, and—you see?" he shrugged eloquently, and struck nonchalantly one of the new matches to light his cigarette.

Don Anabel did not reply. He was thinking fast. The *jefe politico* had not yet returned. He was still off fighting Texans. As an influential private citizen he, Don Anabel, could get the sheriff, *el alguacil mayor*, to arrest the suspected youth and put him in the *carcel*. That would keep him safe, and it would be a thousand times harder for him to get out again than for them to get him in. Yet Don Anabel would not give the order till after dinner. Luis chafed, but he knew enough to hide any undue eagerness. The matter was discussed at the table.

"What, the handsome Americano a spy!" The sentimental Doña Gertrudis could scarcely be-

lieve it. "*Un espio, un emisario secreto!*" Consuelo ceased the busy and healthful plying of spoon and fork from plate to mouth. Her eyes widened, her lips parted, she put down her sopped piece of tortilla. *Ay, madrecita de Dios!* They were actually going to arrest him and put him in that filthy *carcel*, with the *piojos*, yes fleas, from every unwashed peon ready to leap upon him. But what for, what for, papa? They had a letter which proved that he was a spy? But how could one know the Americano had written that same letter? Even after Luis had departed with his father in search of the *alguacil* Consuelo would not believe it.

It is not strange that Consuelo should have been a headstrong product of the same upbringing as her brother. From an adored infancy she had had her way. A wave of small fat arms and two nurses scurried to bring what she wanted. Tears, and even Don Anabel gave her anything she wept for. As she grew older almost every wish was gratified before she had time to pout about it, and it was nothing short of a miracle that with all this, still the Spanish virtues of filial courtesy, respect to one's elders, and strict observance of the manners of the day were instilled into her. Though she rebelled, she observed them. When she was most rebellious Father File-

mon Hubert, the French padre, could always quiet her; a walk in the peace of his lovely quaint garden, a talk with his quiet, gentle, saintly self, and the tantrum would pass.

But she could not seek Father Filemon tonight, and she wanted this youth to play with. She wanted him. He was the first interesting thing that had happened in her life, but yes. He should not be taken away from her. She had been extraordinarily good on the day after her incarceration in her room, and the day after that had wondered all day long what the *Americano* was doing, where he was. He had told her that he did not love the pale girl. *Muy bien*, she could not free this youth by crying, but she could perhaps by trying.

She kept Doña Gertrudis up by one pretext and another till her father and Luis returned, well satisfied with the evening's work. Well, that was that. The plotter had been taken and was even now in the *calabozo*. He had exchanged his comfortable bed at Señora Kataripa's for the bare floor of the *carcel*, as a reward for his scheming.

Don Anabel set forth on the nightly round of his house, locking up.

"Did he not fight, the *Americano*?" Consuelo

questioned Luis, as Doña Gertrudis slumped back in her chair.

"He was asleep," grinned Luis, "and also has a bad arm—hurt by a fall."

"*Covardes!*" hissed Consuelo, and made a face that her mother might not see. "Cowards, not satisfied with arresting him you must take him asleep. I knew it!"

Luis gazed at his sister in astonishment. "*Valgame dios!* What do you care? What is he to you, this Americano *espiador*? He was visiting his country woman the night before; was coming from there when he was hurt, strangely, and they carried him back to her house, where she herself bound his wounds and cared for him. He returned to his quarters but this evening."

It gave Luis a peculiar cruel relief to stab Consuelo, as his sharp sense told him he was doing, thereby sharing and relieving his own stabbing jealousy. He watched her face as he spoke and then coolly lit a cigarette while she glared at him, her hands clenching under his nose. "What is it to me?" she gasped, in fury. "I will show you. I will prove that he is no spy. It is *you* who love the *Guerita*. Did I not see you the night of the *baile*? Have I not heard of your threats? Bah!" Tears trembled in her eyes.

Unmoved, Luis replied, cynically, "Ah, so it is you who are the little spy, eh?"

"It would take no spy to know that you were angry at the *baile*," came the hot retort. "Oh, Luis, he does not want the Americanita. He has told me. Why did you do it?" She wept openly.

This put a different light on the matter. Luis was genuinely sorry. He put his arms sympathetically about his sister and kissed her. "Don't, little one. See, Luis will help you." At this moment Doña Gertrudis roused from her napping, Don Anabel returned, and the family bid one another a formal goodnight.

The following night, after the longest day that he had ever spent in his life, Steven lay in momentary cessation of his attack upon strange little scorpions that kept running out from a corner into the one shaft of light that came through one window which daylight had discovered. The jailer, who had thrust a plate of beans and a jar of water through the door around noon had vouchsafed no information except that Steven would stay right where he was till the *jefe politico* returned; maybe one month, maybe two. *Quien sabe?* May be the *jefe* might be killed and never return.

A careful inspection showed Steven that there was no way to get out, short of digging through

five feet of sunbaked adobe with his finger nails. In addition to that was the trifling consideration of his feet being chained together. He spent the time examining the walls of his jail by the ray of sunlight that came through the little high barred window. Various rings were inbedded in massive beams sunk in the adobe. One for the throat, two for wrists, very suggestively. The dirty walls still held here and there bits of whitewash, which were scratched up with verses and threats inscribed by prisoners. From the ceiling hung two rings that also suggested possibilities from which Steven turned with a sick feeling at the stomach. In one of them a lock of human hair could still be seen. There were bloodstains upon the wall.

From these gloomy contemplations and from a thousand plans for making his escape on the morrow, Steven was roused some time after dark by a turning of the lock in the one door. The bolts were shot back and the jailer appeared, with a covered candle lantern.

"Get up," he ordered, "*Seguido*. In a hurry. Follow me."

"How can I?" Steven protested. "Undo this thing." The jailer stooped and fumbled with a rusty and primitive padlock. Steven stood up and followed the man out. He stood in a small bare

courtyard in the light of the sinking moon. "Over there," pointed the jailer. Steven saw a cloaked figure, a woman, who came quickly forward to meet him.

"Señorita Consuelo! Again you have thought for me!" Steven really trembled as he looked down upon her. She *was* small, he remembered, though he had not stood beside her before. She told him briefly, and with creditable clarity, all she had heard at dinner of the circumstances of his arrest. So they had held up poor Twombly, the trader from St Louis, and taken his letter. Steven smiled grimly.

"What did Señor Don Tiburcio have to say?—Oh, he was in Taos?"

"But you are not a spy?" Consuelo pressed.

Steven laughed. "I have never had a thought of such an office. That was just some business."

"It doesn't matter, I wouldn't care if you were," she said, softly, looking away. Steven peered in amazement upon the small shadowed face; he looked over his shoulder. The jailer had disappeared. He put an arm around Consuelo's shoulders and with one hand turned her face up to his. "Consuelo, when I am out of this, and can—I will tell you something. Will you trust me meanwhile? Since I first saw you in the window—I—I—I wanted to dance with you that

night, awfully. But I could not, for Colonel Ceran insisted on my leaving and I had to go for fear of causing trouble. There was a lady with us, you know. My countrywoman. I shall get away from here tonight, and go to Taos, to see St. Vrain and Don Tiburcio, but I shall get back as soon as possible."

She would send Felicita's husband, Juan, to guide him. Juan would be waiting at Estevan's door in an hour. "You will be back?" murmured Consuelo. "When? In a week? Ten days?"

"In a week." His ears were thrumming, his heart violently knocking his ribs, "unless I am shot through the back, I shall see you. No?" He longed to say, "I love you; I have just realized that I loved you from the moment I saw you in the window."

She nodded solemnly. "In a week, then, from tonight. At ten. At my balcony?"

He must not come home with her now lest they be seen. Felicita waited beyond the wall to escort her. Consuelo snatched a blanket from under Felicita's *reboso* and Steven threw it over himself and walked calmly out of the corral beside the two, through the dark lanes, out upon a moonlight-flooded street—to the garden gate of Don Anabel's house. He lingered but a moment to bend over Consuelo's hand, then strode away

to his own place, where he had nearly to pound the door down to waken the good Doña Katarina and get in.

Two days later Steven was riding through groves of golden, trembling aspen down the mountain slope into Taos. Juan had taken him by the upper trail so that they could ride under cover. The mountain-side was a glory of autumnal yellow, each leaf like beaten gold. The streams ran cold and clear, and full of rainbow trout. The beauty of the world fitted well with Steven's mood. He was joyously, rapturously, in love. Past the white pyramid of the pueblo of Taos, rising against sky and mountain in great steps, they rode through low thickets of willow and copper-tinted cottonwood, into San Fernando de Taos. The little Spanish town snuggled in the valley, its houses festooned with ropes of scarlet chili, its fields stacked with golden grain and yellow corn.

Steven sat, the next morning, at breakfast with Ceran St. Vrain and told of what happened. "But six of the traders carried letters in duplicate," he boasted, "so unless all perish my father will have news of me."

St. Vrain nodded approval, pulling on his long pipe. "Señor Garcia has already returned to Santa Fe. He left yesterday morning, but by

the lower route; yet I would not trust him overmuch. He is a wise, secretive man, and would do as much as suited his purpose. No more."

"You mean he would use me? And then I might pay the piper?"

"I think so. As you have missed the return trip, I would stay here with us in Taos until another caravan comes, when you can return East, or stay and cast in your lot here, trapping, trading, building up a business yourself in case your father does not care to send you any merchandise. I will take you on as an *engagé* if you decide so."

"I will stay—for two or three days," Steven smiled, "but I must return to Santa Fe in any event. He could scarcely wait for the night of his meeting with Consuelo. "After that we shall see." At any rate, Don Tiburcio had told no one of his transactions with Steven, and Steven would for his part keep his word, too, and not reveal them. St. Vrain regarded Steven keenly. "Do not break your heart over a Spanish girl, *mon fils*. Nothing can come of it."

But no persuasion, nor the fascination of the lovely and peaceful upland valley where Charles Bent and Ceran St. Vrain were doing flourishing business could keep him from starting back on the morning of the fourth day. Juan rode with him, solemn, yet friendly; but they talked little as

Juan was a Pueblo from the Indian village of Santo Domingo, and his Spanish was even less fluent than his English.

The sun hung low the following afternoon as they came down through Tesuque and approached the western road into Santa Fe. Juan became more talkative. Indians did not like all Americans, he vouchsafed. The man with the white daughter he was one they did not like. He Juan, had heard that they would drive that man out, and the two other traders who had settled next him. All of them, *si*. They were thieves; they took the water of the Indians. They sold flour for sugar, and water in whisky. Sometime this day they would be driven out, he thought.

"What makes you say that?" Steven pressed. Had Juan heard for sure?

Don Luis had said it; he had told the Indians to go ahead. They must make haste, then, for the American girl might be in danger. Juan was not eager to press ahead, but followed Steven, and they covered the last few miles at a quick canter. The sun had set and it was growing dark when, on the last stretch before they came to the ranchitos where the Americans had taken up their homesteads, they saw smoke beyond.

Spurring ahead with impatience, Steven saw that Bragdon's place was belching flames and that

clouds of smoke were rolling up from his fields. Juan rode up beside him, interested but not concerned. They saw that there was fighting, heard an occasional shot. "Stop here," Juan insisted. "No good go straight to the door. We come up behind. No good to be dead." They skirted the base of the hill under cover of the smoke.

Behind the L of the adobe house Hope cowered with Doren, dry-eyed, their clothing drenched. She had fought fire in the fields with her father and the other white men until she saw flames coming out of the house. Then she had carried water from the little well in the yard and thrown it on the woodwork, till there was no more water. They did not know when the fire had started, or how, until, as they fought the flames and began to drive them back, a row of Indian heads rose up from the *acequia's* rim and a tomahawk neatly swept Bragdon's hat from his head. The Indians pushed the handful of white men back and back. Hope emptied her father's shotgun down the hill without avail, and now the men had their backs to the flaming house and the last shot had been fired at the assailants, who still kept under cover.

The Pueblos saw that the white men had no more ammunition with them, and a half dozen men sprang forward. Hope, peering round the

corner, did not know whether to snatch this opportunity to run towards Santa Fe with Doren or to try to hide among the hills. Just as the Indians and white men grappled, a new fighter appeared suddenly and sprang into the fray, tripping, kicking, shooting. After a few minutes of panting struggle the Indians melted away, the shouting died down. It was quite dark now. Hope ran around the house with Doren and up to her father. Bragdon sat on the ground, a bullet sunk in his leg. Juan came running out of the house, bearing in his arms the remainder of the fire—a mass of inflammable stuff which had been carried in and set in flames inside—and when he and Steven had beaten out the flaming, smoldering cloth and woodwork within they all retreated into the house. The Americans all were exhausted. The skirmish had been going on all day. They had not eaten since early in the morning. The walls were standing, but the place was ruined, and the rancho of the settlers below was probably in ashes. The two other Americans had come to Bragdon's help when they saw fire, and, unable to get back, had had to watch their own places go up in smoke. Theirs was the greater loss, for they had worked for two years now at their homesteads.

One of these neighbors kept watch with Steve's

loaded gun while Juan and Steven helped the trembling Hope to prepare some food. They covered the two windows with blankets and stuffed the chinks in the door. In the hot, stifling, smoky room, Hope cleaned and bound her father's leg. The bullet had been probed for and extracted. Bragdon moaned for a drink from the jug which he had secreted; he took his drink and fell asleep. Doren was fed and made to lie down on the last blanket, and then Hope, Steven, and the men made their supper from the beans and tortillas. The moon was sinking behind the mountains when at last Steven peered out. It was at least twelve o'clock. He had missed his rendezvous with Consuelo.



Chapter VIII

FOR HIS TREASURE

DON TIBURCIO DE GARCIA was indeed all that Ceran St. Vrain had said of him. He knew how to move silently, unobserved. He knew how to wait. He had thus been delaying his departure from Santa Fe, despite his final dismissal by Consuelo, for two reasons. One reason was the message from ex-President Pedraza, delivered to him by Steven on the night of his arrival in Santa Fe. The other reason was Hope Bragdon. He had no intention of being dismissed from her company so briefly and summarily as on the first occasion of his seeing her.

On the afternoon after Bragdon had set the dog on Luis, Don Tiburcio, having made sure that the Yankee was not at home, had himself ridden by the house, stopping there for an hour. He had, however, previously prevailed upon Doña Katarina to precede him by half an hour in a call upon the American girl. The three of them

chatted gayly with Doña Katarina as duenna and interpreter. The callers departed together, leaving Hope a little bewildered, but smiling. The Spanish gentleman had asked permission to call again upon herself and her father, as soon as he should have returned from a trip to Taos, whither he was going, he said, on the morrow.

Then had come Steven's visit, and its disastrous outcome, and Hope saw no more of him for a time. On the evening before the terrible raid on their home Don Tiburcio again appeared, and though he regretted much the absence of Señor Bragdon from the house, he dismounted and sat down upon the doorstep, playing with Doren. He made the boy a present of a fine Indian bow and arrow, also of a pair of Mexican leather chaps. Doren was delighted and Hope's heart warmed as it could not have been in any other way.

They did not see Don Tiburcio again until the day after the attack. He learned of the calamity from Doña Katarina as soon as he got back.

She had heard the news through Steven the morning following the fire and fight. Don Tiburcio hastened at once out to the parched ranchito. He came dressed in his most elegant clothes, with two servants riding behind, and with gifts of food and fine blankets. James Bragdon

greeted him cordially from his bed in the living room—a wealthy Mexican gentleman, a merchant of Chihuahua too.

They talked of New Spain and Old Mexico. Don Tiburcio spoke of the silver placers south of Santa Fe, the bullion of Chihuahua, the riches of Old Mexico. In his eagerness to seek such wealth James Bragdon could have kicked off the bed-clothes and started out at once, but for the wounded leg. He grew impatient with the thought of ranching, especially after the attack of the day before. He would go prospecting.

Don Tiburcio, who never lifted a finger to wait upon himself, whose servant followed him even upon the Trail, drew water from the little well for Hope. He spoke to her in his carefully rehearsed English and presently said: "You are like a white flower. But you are cold; you do not live; you do not love. I love you. I will care for you so that you will learn how to smile."

But Hope remained as silent and impassive as ever. She seemed to shrink from such speech. Don Tiburcio went quietly away after a while. He must give her time. He would return. Later he sought Don Anabel in his garden. "Señor, *amigo*," he began when they had drunk a glass each to the other's health, "this youth, this American who came with the traders, Estevan Mercer,"

—Don Anabel showed such signs of choler that Don Tiburcio hurried on—"he is not guilty of the charge brought against him by the *alguacil*. I had not spoken to you before, but it was concerning a matter of business with myself that the order for firing arms and ammunition was sent East by the youth. If ever it arrives it shall be shipped down to Mexico for the supporters of Pedraza."

Don Anabel listened with the formal courtesy that is *decoroso* between Spanish gentlemen. "The incident is then closed," he answered. "I regret that the young man should have been forced to spend a day and a night in the *carcel*, and yet had you not spoken he would probably have spent another night there tonight. I had just learned that he had returned from Taos, whither he had escaped. The jailer here is no good; I have had him lashed."

Don Tiburcio could not control his surprise. "Yes, while he may have ordered firing arms and ammunition at your request and for your purpose," Don Anabel continued, "he has also provided himself with a shipment which may arrive in Santa Fe any day now, according to this letter to Colonel Bent intercepted by one of my guides and just brought down to me this week which could refer only to your young—associate. He

was advised that, should a shipment of arms come by caravan to the Fort, he was to forward it to Taos, where it would be called for by the right party."

Don Tiburcio flushed. "This is the inside of the matter, Don Anabel, which has come to your attention. The truth is that the boy has served me well bringing me a secret letter from Pedraza, whom you know our family supports, to the effect that I am to await here a shipment of arms which he is having sent from St. Louis by way of Westport Landing. As you know, the usurper holds all the ports of Mexico, so any help to our party must come through overland shipments from the north. I make no doubt but that Pedraza sent word also to Colonel Bent, in the event that aught should happen to the youth. It is this shipment for which I am waiting, señor, now that your beautiful daughter has rejected my suit."

Don Anabel started with surprise and disappointment. "Señor, I was not aware of that."

"Partly to remove my presence from Consuelo," Don Tiburcio continued, "and partly to confer with Colonel St. Vrain I went to Taos myself to learn whether he had news from Bent's Fort of the caravan of guns, as it had not yet arrived here. I thought he might know whether it had taken the northern or the southern trail. I shall

wait for still a few days, perhaps a few weeks, the arrival of the caravan. But I beg of you"—Don Tiburcio was genuinely disturbed—"I beg of you to permit that I remove my embarrassing presence from the so kind and lavish hospitality of your house."

To this Don Anabel finally acceded with much regret. When Don Tiburcio had departed with all his personal possessions, Don Anabel sat for a long time smoking. He was tempted to send for Consuelo, but affection overcame his disappointment. Consuelo had been curiously subdued of late, at times pettish, at times gentle.

"The poor child does not know her own mind," Doña Gertrudis excused. "She has no need to marry so young, like a common peona, after all. In Chihuahua they do not marry till eighteen, nineteen often. Let her take her time."

No wonder that Consuelo was distracted. Each day of the week that had passed had dawned with hope and ended in despair. Secretly she looked for some word from the Americano. He had not been seen about the Villa. Felicita could vouch for that. The *alguacil* had been looking for him for several days after his escape. Doña Katarina swore he was not there and all but spat in the face of the sheriff. Had he gone away again?

Was he in trouble? Or had he simply neglected her? The uncertainty was maddening.

Don Anabel was deeply disturbed at learning from the lips of Don Tiburcio himself that Consuelo would not consent to marry him. He smoked for some time and then went in to his office, where shortly an evil-looking barefooted peon, clad only in his cotton camisa and pantaloons, was shown in to him. They were closeted for more than an hour, and when Don Anabel had dismissed the man he sent for Consuelo. She was only too glad to be excused from the necessity of sitting longer in the garden with Doña Gertrudis, Manuel, and their neighbors, Elena de Guevara and her brother Felipe Ladron de Guevara.

Don Anabel came at once sternly to the point. She, Consuelo, had been seen to talk, on a certain night, with the Americano from her balcony. And more recently, not ten days ago, she had been observed standing with him outside the garden gate. It was incredible. She must understand that not only she herself, but the foolish youth, too, must suffer for these indiscretions. Don Anabel would see that this youth received a flogging that same night. Consuelo repressed an involuntary scream. Flogged! With those blood-letting rawhides! But whipping had not

been since she was a child of seven! Pride struggled within her. How could she confess that it was she who had made the first advances—that the American had come not to serenade her, but at her summons. No; he was a man, let him take the flogging. She tossed her head. Others had endured more for her sake!

But she could not. "Papa, it was not the fault of the Yanqui. I sent for him, to warn him to have a care, as I had heard threats for his safety. And the last time, he met me—he met me on the street, returning from Doña Katerina's with Felicita I was—and like any *caballero* would, he brought us home. Will you flog him for that?"

Deeply chagrined that his daughter had gone probably to a rendezvous with the American, Don Anabel sent her to her room till he should give her leave to join the family again. He left the house at once, riding away in great agitation on his fastest mare.

Consuelo wept, enduring such pain as only sixteen can feel. It was not alone the disgrace with the family. Alas, no. Everything faded before the fact that this golden youth, brought by the Trail to her very window, and whom she had liberated from the *carcel*, did not care for her. He had broken his promise. He had stayed at the house of the girl called Hope until way past

the hour of their promised meeting. Consuelo had trembled at the window till nearly midnight, Felicita at her feet. Now Consuelo clung to her oft-abused Felicita as she had when a tiny imperious little thing, when Felicita had been slave indeed to her whims and charms. The caress of Consuelo's tiny hands had enchained the childless bond-woman then, and through the years had softened the sting of Consuelo's raging rebukes, the slaps and unreason. For all this Felicita was now repaid as Consuelo poured out her grief. At length she sat up and dried her tears.

"It is well, Felicita. Go take siesta, *pobre de ti* [poor thee]. How good and kind to your wicked ungrateful one all these years." She pushed her gently through the door.

As the hot afternoon wore on the house of Don Anabel lay steeped in its customary respite from the trials of this world. The rooms were silent, deep in siesta. Lupe slept, Doña Gertrudis snored, Consuelo tossed. But there was one who did not take siesta. A figure stood in the darkened sala in stockinged feet, motionless. There was not a sound. Good; the family slept. Consuelo, however, was finding no repose that hot September afternoon. Something urged her out into the patio. The smell of water on earth came

refreshingly to her aching head. She leaned against the leafy trellis of the trumpet vines, looking idly beyond toward an open window of the sala. Who had carelessly left it open during the heat?

A moving shadow caught her eye. Quick as a flash she slipped along the wall and peered round the casement. Ah, it was only Luis. What was he doing, thrusting out that long rolled-up package through the window bars so quietly. Before Consuelo could speak a waiting hand had grasped the package and Luis had slipped into his shoes and stepped quickly through the *zaguan* to his own room. Consuelo, left alone, returned to hers.

She did not dress that afternoon. Her pillow was wet with tears when Felicita crept in again. As the woman moved softly about the room, pouring out the tepid water from Consuelo's silver basin, laying away her clothes in the carven chest, she talked in a low voice. At what she had to say Consuelo sat bolt upright, clenching the down pillow in her fists, her face paling with new misery. Then she sank back with a moan, covering her eyes.

"Felicita, it cannot be true. Luis! What will he do next! Tell me, tell me carefully." Luis had sent two men after the Yankee Bragdon, who

had gone South prospecting, to overtake and kill him. He wanted to get him out of the way so that he could have the daughter. It was revenge, too, Felicita said. The Yankee trader had insulted Luis unforgivably. The little boy? Well, if he died or if he survived it did not matter. He would be abandoned. They would not actually kill him.

But the stain of foul murder would be on Luis's soul. Luis, he was only twenty. How happily they had played together on the banks of the stream such a few short years ago. Luis had always been kind to her then. She looked up to him, was so proud of him, and suffered so when he was punished. A rush of feeling from deep wells within her rose—tenderness for Luis, a weakness toward his sins.

Then suddenly something else smote her. He must be saved from this. And the little boy, the helpless little boy, he must be saved. She had a plan. "Quick, Felicita. Come, we will go to Father Filemon Hubert. He will tell me what to do." Vespers was tolling from the old bell as they ascended the steps of the church at the end of the plaza.

Steven had indeed not been seen about the streets of the Villa. He had kept close to his rooms, tossing with a fever ever since the night

of the fire and fight, guarded by the good Doña Katarina much more effectually and comfortably than by the jailer. Some infection, Doña Katarina swore, from the filthy *carcel*; probably the water he was given to drink there, for he had been ill within a week afterward.

He was surprised, on the afternoon after his return from Taos, to receive a visit from Don Tiburcio.

"I regret very much," said that gentleman, earnestly, "that our business together should have been the cause of your having spent so uncomfortable a twenty-four hours. I have just come from Don Anabel Lopez and have explained the nature of the letter which you sent back East and also of the message which you brought to me. I am sure that, as a man of his word, he will cause you no more trouble on that score."

Steven was glad of that. He felt, indeed, that he would be unable to cause any one else any trouble for a time himself. He was sick, wretched, and a part of his wretchedness was caused by the thought of having failed to meet Consuelo the night before. And she had helped him to escape. He did not like to owe that to a girl. His head would surely stop whirling so dizzily by evening and he would go to Consuelo's house; get some word to her.

But Doña Katarina came in and put him back on his bed, where he stayed unromantically put for a week, slightly out of his head, caring little about intrigue of any sort for the weakness and nausea that held him. But his hardy youth was not to be disposed of by whatever lurking illness had poisoned him. When he was able to sit up again and gaze with some slight degree of enthusiasm at a bowl of chicken soup, Don Tiburcio, who had come to his room every day, came in and sat down rather wearily.

The seasoned *caballero* seemed rather depressed, but he was more friendly, more confiding, than he had ever been. "My young friend," said he, "I am leaving Santa Fe tonight. I trust that fate may again bring us together. I am your debtor and I would gladly discharge the debt."

They parted with sincere regret, and Steven determined that it must be because of Consuelo that Don Tiburcio was leaving.

Three nights later Doña Katarina came in when Steven was sitting in a chair, bearing fresh news. Señor Bragdon had gone off prospecting with the boy, in spite of his daughter's protests. Señorita Bragdon was nearly crazy. The Yanqui said he needed the boy to drive the mule, and it would do him good. Doña Katarina was all fury and sympathy.

"That is pretty bad," agreed Steven, seriously. "Which way did he go? Does anyone know?"

It was south, she thought, following the trail of Don Tiburcio Garcia. He expected to overtake the Spaniard; began to get ready as soon as he heard Don Tiburcio had left Santa Fe, and started out, himself, the next night although his leg was still not well enough to walk much on. Señorita 'Ope Bragdon had told Doña Katarina that Don Tiburcio had been telling her father all about the placers south of Santa Fe, the silver bullion of Chihuahua, and some strange silver sands he had seen on the way up. The Yanqui got all excited about it.

"Do you know," Doña Katarina beamed in the knowledge she was about to impart, "Don Tiburcio asked the Yanqui for Señorita 'Ope's hand in marriage, and Senorita 'Ope would not. The Señor father was very angry at her."

"Why, then it was not Consuelo?" Steven was amazed. He was sorry for Don Tiburcio, and for Hope, too. She was a good little thing.

"Yes, she is good," Doña Katarina put in, warmly. "Her father left some goods here. He was keeping them till he could get higher prices, after all the other merchandise had gotten worn out, but 'Ope—Esperanza, I call her—has already given it to the Indians who got flour mixed with

their sugar, in place of the money or skins they traded for it."

Steven had passed a restless afternoon. His recovery had been very rapid. Doña Katarina had insisted, however, that he remain inside until after sundown. But now the sun was set, it was already growing dark and he made ready to go out. As he reached his door Doña Katarina returned, "An Indian is waiting here to see you, Señor Estevan," she said.

It was the silent Juan, who squatted on the floor beside Steven's chair and rolled his cigarette without saying a word. He rolled another which he offered Steven and smoked for a few minutes before he spoke. The Señorita Lopez wished the young gentleman to come, Juan said, if he would be so kind, on a matter of importance concerning one he loved—to come that night at the tenth hour. He, Juan, would escort him to the place. Steven's heart leaped. Adventure had been kind to him. But this, ah, this was something new and strangely sweet.

How soft a little town can be under moonlight, under starlight. What is more endearing than little houses with candlelit windows, glowing whitely under the moon! How lovely a garden; a nightingale singing in a flowering tamarack above the *acequia*. Down the banks of the little

silver river, to the foot of the garden, went Juan and Steven, and up over the wall. *Caramba!* There was broken glass set there. Careful, señor. Had he cut his hand? *A bagatela.*

Then down on the other side of the wall and Consuelo standing in the starlight, hooded but unmistakable. Steven stepped eagerly forward, but the straight figure, something in the poise of her head, restrained him.

"Señor Ess-tev-an," she spoke almost in a whisper, "I would not send for you again, thus boldly, but that I have learned something touching us both most closely."

"May I not tell you first, Consuelo," Steven pleaded, "what befell me the night I was to have met you?"

"I have already heard, señor," she replied, with vast dignity. "It is unnecessary to speak of it further when time presses so. Señor, I have heard from my faithful Felicita that the father of the Americana, Señor Bragdon, has gone off to prospect for gold and silver, with the young one, the boy."

Steven nodded. "I know." But Consuelo hurried on. "He is—he is to be followed, to be killed, you understand. To be gotten out of the way so that his daughter may be married by some one. The man has enemies. He is not

pleasant, it seems, nor just. But the child will be left to perish if the man is killed."

"Who, who would do such a thing?" Steve gasped. "Murder, murder an innocent child!"

Consuelo nodded violently; her hand clutched her throat; she could scarcely speak. "But they can be overtaken, for Juan knows how to follow by the river much faster than they can go by land. They go to the Silver Sand of which Don Tiburcio told us; and the men who follow left but this afternoon. Juan knows them. It is an even chance to overtake them, and buy them off, for they have been pledged silver. Or to overtake the Yanqui and save him . . . Ess-tevan, will you go?"

"It is not for myself I ask this, señor, but for those who are dear to us both. I know no one else I can trust, but you and Juan." She could whisper only. How tall, how fair, how fine, he looked standing there. And he loved the Yanqui girl; she had even refused Don Tiburcio for him. "Did we love one another I could not ask such a sacrifice, but"—she could not see the sudden hurt that came over the face of the tall youth before her—"but, for the sake of that girl and the boy you will go, you will follow Bragdon tonight, and save them if you can?"

Steven would not have hesitated a moment in

any event, except to learn the way to find a guide. "I will go," he replied, "for the sake of the child and Hope Bragdon and—" he swayed toward her, and she, who had with difficulty restrained her sobs, toward him, but at his words she recoiled. Only the young, only first love, can be so mistaken.

"Señorita," Steven tried again, "when last we met I made you a promise that I was unable to carry out. Please ——"

A tiny light appeared in a window in the silent house at the garden's end. Consuelo lifted a warning finger, and with a warm pressure upon his hand fled down the banks of the irrigating ditch and disappeared within the shadow of the tamaracks.

Steven heard Juan whistle on the other side of the wall and vaulted over quickly. They walked rapidly up the street. In his rooms Steven wrote a note to his father, another to Doña Katarina. There was nothing to write to Consuelo; she did not love him.

On the same morning that Doña Katarina stepped into the spotlessly kept room where her lodger slept and found the bed unrumpled and a note upon the chest of drawers, Don Anabel Lopez awoke and went through his house, having been absent during the preceding afternoon and

late into the night at his ranch below in the valley. And shortly thereafter the noise of his wrath went through the house like a storm bursting.

The household was assembled in the sala and its awed gaze directed to an empty frame where once had hung the Murillo "Madonna and Child." Don Anabel's face was white with anger and deep concern. He spoke quietly to his household now, describing what would be the consequences to the thief if he did not at once repent, and promised lenience if he did. Then began a rigorous examination into all the circumstances surrounding the moment when the picture had last been seen by each member of the hacienda. Consuelo had been in her room all week. Luis and Doña Gertrudis had together seen the picture just before siesta the day before. Doña Gertrudis had herself wakened Luis, but they noticed nothing later, for they had gone to supper through the patio and had sat at dinner late. It all came to nothing. He himself had been the last to see his cherished canvas, as far as he could learn.

"*Dios mio!* Had Don Tiburcio not departed four days before, I should be tempted even to think that his love for the thing had overpowered him."

Who else had left the Villa? Come, here was

a path to follow. At length, among sundry trappers, Indians, peons, and one Franciscan friar, it was learned that the American youth was missing. Don Anabel seized upon his name at once as being in very likelihood the thief. To Consuelo the knowledge had come in a flash the moment her eyes rested upon the empty frame. Luis, the afternoon before. He had rolled up the canvas and passed it through the window. From that ordeal, Consuelo the child emerged Consuelo the woman. Luis did not leave the house that day, curiously enough, but lounged about in his room. Consuelo sent for him late in the afternoon.

He heard her brave accusation brazenly, flippantly, but at the end he broke like a bad small boy. Yes, he had taken the painting, since she had seen him. But he pleaded on his knees that she would not betray him. He wept. He kissed her hands and face. Luis feared only one person in the world—his father. Consuelo, in turn, pleaded with her brother to get the painting back again. It would age their father. He could not, he swore. It was impossible. Impossible, he told her. But he would not say what he had done with it, why he could not get it back.

When she had promised with grief, not to betray him, for the sake of their father, she came to the greater guilt. But feeling safe now, Luis

grew hard. Murder? The dog of an American deserved it. The man had set the dogs on him, Luis. The girl would be better off without this father, anyhow. "She likes me," Luis swelled. He had called upon her the night before and was to go again tonight.

"But the child, the child?" Consuelo almost screamed. Luis shrugged. They would not harm him. He'd told his men to let the boy go. Luis would stay for no more words, but went off impatiently. Consuelo took her black shawl—her father had given her leave now to go out—and as she passed through the sala was very gentle with the querulous questioning of Doña Gertrudis, sitting plump and pathetic alone there, totally upset by the calamity to her husband.

Consuelo passed out into the heat that still rose from the dust of the streets and radiated from the sun-soaked walls about. She came to the garden of Father Filemon. Her face was stricken. In these few days life had turned from a soft easy round of hot chocolate, cool wine, fresh frocks, a looking for new gifts to be brought to her through the unconsidered labor and pain and bloodshed of others, to this sorrow and shame and sacrifice, so near to the hearth and the heart.

And she had sent away the brave and honest

American to do what Luis himself should have done. She'd sent him down into a dangerous land unknown to him, where the Apache and the Sioux and the very corn-growing Pueblos were unfriendly. In her pride she had sent him away, this tall young man whom she loved, without listening to a word he had to say to her. She had shielded her brother with his good name, and he unable to defend himself because he had gone on her mission. And now she knew that he had loved her. She knelt before the padre.



Chapter IX

THE WHITE SANDS

STEVEN and Juan were lost in the world of vast sand dunes; yellow dunes that rose like titanic anthills, while they were the ants, to labor up one side and down the other. In order to make speed and if possible to overtake Bragdon, they had descended the Rio Grande from a point just below Albuquerque in a bull boat, a canoe made of scraped buffalo hide drawn taut over willow boughs. On the wide muddy stream, burdened with tons of the erosive soil through which it flowed, they wound southward at the rate of thirty, sometimes forty, miles a day, swirling between low wooded banks beyond which blue mountains lay always in sight.

They were forced to portage around one beaver dam after another. Every moment afloat demanded the watchful care of both Steven and Juan. Countless branches imbedded in the viscous, sandy bottoms, reached out to pierce

their hide-covered boat. Eddies and whirlpools caught at them at unexpected turns in the current, which swung its channel erratically from left to right of the river's course. Sometimes they were stranded on sand bars, for the shallows could not be seen through the muddy water. Steven had twice sunk into quicksands when he got out to lighten the boat and push off from a bar. Only through Juan's skill and prompt action could he have gotten free.

In between these delays they flew south with the stream. The river was almost never used by the Pueblos, Juan said. Only an occasional trapper who was used to shooting rapids and handling a canoe dared launch his bull boat on the treacherous Rio Grande. On the second night it rained heavily all night and they slept beneath their boat, which made a very good tent. Steven had never thought of his illness since the night he had left Santa Fe. The open air had apparently aided nature in restoring him completely. After the rain the river was so swollen with the deluge that had cascaded down the hillsides that the water rolled in great combers. It meant that they could go very fast, yet they were in constant danger of capsizing. They strapped their guns tightly across their backs and fastened their ammunition belts securely so that these should not

be lost. Steven carried also a money belt filled with silver delivered him by Juan from Consuelo in case they should overtake the paid murderers.

Toward dusk they were looking for a good landing spot where they could go ashore and make a fire on some wooded bank, when a greater danger than the river threatened. Rounding a sharp curve in the stream they saw a great dark form breasting the combers ahead. As they were swept nearer they saw the massive head and shoulders of a great grizzly rising high from the river. His coat was heavy with the muddy water, yet he split the waves as though their current were nothing. They were nearly abreast of the beast when he struck shallows and rose in his height beside them for a moment; then began to sink.

"Quicksand!" shouted Steven, and the Indian paddled violently across current and away from the grizzly. The bear with a mighty effort lunged free from the sand, but there was not enough depth for him to swim in, and he made straight for the canoe, floundering, but gaining ground. His paws reached the stern of the bull boat. Juan beat at them in the gathering darkness. The canoe tipped and the prow rose under the pressure of the great bear of the Rockies.

Steven seized a small hatchet and, leaning back as far as he dared, he chopped at the paws which were inundating them. There was a roar of rage and pain, and the bear dropped back, sinking below the surface for a moment. *Gracias a Dios* they had struck the main channel again! The current bore them on to the far side of the river and in the darkness they left the bear behind.

But dangerous as it was to be swept along by night on that black and swollen stream, Juan would not attempt a landing for another half hour. When they had drawn their canoe up on a small strip of sandy beach and lit a fire, they saw the giant claws of the grizzly imbedded in the blood-stained thwart of the boat. Steven wondered if they would ever survive to find Doren and his father. To Juan their progress was not unusual or eventful; he pointed out how much better time they were making, with no Indians to attack them on the way, than the Yankee possibly could, traveling overland with mules.

It seemed as though every four-footed creature of the Rocky Mountain country came to the banks of the river, and wild fowl of all kinds were there for the shooting—duck, geese, swan, bittern, crane, heron. On the third day Juan pointed to a certain peak rising from a low-lying range east

of the river. That was where they were bound. The river had now become unnavigable, for the deep channels disappeared at times and they were forced to make portages in midstream, so to speak. Great dun-colored hills, bare and without a sign of vegetation, closed them in.

"It is there, to the Mescalero, where the Apaches are," said Juan, "that we must go. By this time the Señor Yankee may have reached that country, and as he sought gold and silver, it is in the mountains that we will find him, not in the river valley. His pursuers cannot have overtaken him yet, unless he stopped by the way, in which case we would have been too late, anyway. As it is, we are ahead of them at least."

To Steven this appeared like a monstrous valley of death. Not a living thing was to be seen, except the leering faces of carp poking their evil heads, with whiskers like tentacles, from the muddy waters. On the land where they abandoned the bull boat a few small lizards scurried away. High in a turquoise vaulted heaven soared those scavengers of death, the buzzards. Underfoot stirred one living thing that rattled as Steven passed. It too spelled death.

And then they entered those baffling dunes, carrying enough game and water to last for that day and the next, and Steven became one with

the desert in another of its forms. Again and again Juan would climb to the summit of the highest foothill to locate some blue peak, and would descend to thread those deceptive winding ways at their feet. Miraculously, it seemed to Steven, they emerged from the dunes at the end of the second day just as Juan had said they would, and thereafter they bore eastward, directing their footsteps toward a pass in the nearer range, which, because of the height of the dunes, could not be seen at all before.

Here they came upon a tiny village of Pueblo Indians, nestling beside a clear stream upon the sloping side of the mountain. Juan found that he could speak their tongue; they were of Queres stock, as was his pueblo. They made inquiries for Bragdon and Doren, but the Indians said that the two had not passed that way. The Pueblos were a friendly, farming people and there was no reason to doubt that they were speaking the truth.

For a small bar of pure silver Steven and Juan took their fill of the best of corn cakes, of savory kid stew cooked with little wild onions and green beans of native raising, and rode away upon two frisky mares, saddled and bridled with rope and blanket only, it is true, but worth ten bars of silver to Steven's blistered feet. Over

the mountain passes they rode, through a pretty winding canyon filled with flowers and small pine, and came out upon a wide flat plain, across which they cantered as upon a level table. Gleaming sand and hard yellow clay gave back like castanets the sound of their mares' unshod hooves. And as they trotted ahead the mountains rose before them, up and up from the mesa till they towered even above the foothills that came rippling graciously down to the plain. They slept on the desert and went on at dawn.

The tents of the Apaches clustered thick upon the grassy slopes of the mountain-side. The chiefs of the Apaches welcomed them with tobacco and with the white meat of fish that a short time before had been leaping in the sunlight from the crystal-clear streams of Mescalero. With signs, and with his few words of Apache, Juan of Santo Domingo made clear the purpose for which they had come. To find a white man and child. An Apache chieftain who came forward to listen nodded and, speaking and gesticulating rapidly, gave Juan to understand that a white man and a boy child had passed that way, had lingered along their streams, shaking the basin which yields gold and silver, and had departed but yesterday.

Where had he gone, and why? The chieftain said they had forced the man to give them half

the dust which he had found with his placer mining, and that, not being content with this arrangement, he had gone off to a place where he thought he would find more silver and have to part with none of it. This seemed to provoke much amusement among the staid Apaches; the younger braves rocked with merriment. Taking Steven and Juan to a high point of rock upon the mountain-side, the interpreter pointed their gaze across the plain south and westward, where a shining space was seen upon the desert. He spoke rapidly.

Juan turned to Steven. "He says that below lie the White Sands. They are a place of death. Naught grows there, naught dwells there, but the spirits of the departed and of the desert. There is a legend that the shining sands are half silver; that if sifted they would yield pure silver dust. See how they shine from here, he says, and on windy days the white grains have been borne clear across the desert and up into the mountains, where they have lain thick on the tepees of the Apache. It is the spirits of the desert seeking to return home to the mountains, many say."

That was where James Bragdon, the Yankee, had gone with his little boy. Why bother to kill the white man? The desert would attend to him; and if he escaped its embracing sands—two of the half-bloods from the northern town Indians,

they who had mingled with the Spanish, would find him. These two had come but a few hours after the white man left and had followed on his trail. Footsore and angry, for they had thought to overtake him within a day or two days of their starting, and they had been after him now for nearly a moon.

Blood silver they sought to gain, but they could not lay it across their itching palms until they had the white man's scalp to show in proof of his death. Yes, the half-breed Mexicans had told the Apache chieftain all about it, offering turquoise and wampum for this same information of the white man's course.

As Steven stood upon the mountain-side, looking out over that vast plain, seventy-five leagues from one mountain range to another, his imagination pictured the face of the boy Doren rising in the shimmering heat waves. He gave the Apache the silver beads which he wore beneath his deer-skin shirt, and he and Juan turned back down the mountain trail. They could not hope to reach that far place of gleaming death until another day had dawned, nevertheless they kept their horses moving steadily until dark fell. They ate, and rode again, until the bright moon sank behind the mountains and the mesa was plunged into darkness.

The sun had been up for several hours and the desert was already a little heady in its palpitating warmth when Steven and Juan stood beside the bank of gleaming gypsum that rose sheer fifty feet from the plain—a desert within a desert. A light breeze blew off a thin mist-like spray from the wind-carved edges of the sands, so that their mystery was veiled, dazzling. Before them the tracks of feet, human feet both big and little, showed in the trail of burros' hooves, went on to the edge of a gradual slope ascending the sands, and were lost, while the tracks of the burros turned about and went away back over the desert.

Juan stooped, and with his eyes close to the ground examined the tracks intently. When he rose he spread his hands in an eloquent gesture, then folded his blanket tightly about him and stood with uncovered head.

"Juan," Steven demanded, "what do you find? Do you think ——?"

Juan drew his blanket over his head and spoke solemnly: "The breeds have taken the mules and returned whence they came. That means—no hope. The man? Gone. The child? *Quien sabe!*"

Steven threw down his mare's bridle and, taking the gourd of water from the Indian, he threw it over his own shoulder. "Come." He strode

toward the raised desert before them. "We must find out."

Juan shook his head and sat down with an air of finality. He would not venture upon that cursed place; the evil spirits of the desert inhabited it. It was abhorred by man and beast. If the white man would enter, it must be alone. Perhaps the spirits of the sands would not speak to him with the words that led to madness. Juan would wait on the desert's brink until Estevan came out. He would need some one then to take his hand and lead him on.

Steven saw that to remonstrate was futile. He plunged ahead up the incline and entered the white deadliness alone. He found himself upon a plain that shone like snow and that seemed by the strange magic of mirage to stretch away to the very horizon, to lift to meet the turquoise sky and the azure mountains, so that Juan and the horses and the desert below passed out of the picture; might not have existed. All the world was white and blue enamel, and the air swimming sunlight. Steven tucked under his wide-brimmed hat a dark bit of cambric torn from his sash to shield his eyes from the glare. His gaze swept the expanse before him. Not a footstep marred the snowy whiteness. He looked back suddenly for his own tracks. There were none. He stood

alone in his own footsteps and not a sign remained of the way he had come. This filled him with horror. He planted his feet deeply and walked on the sheltered side of ridges that he might leave some trace of his own progress.

Hours passed and it seemed that he must have gone further than a man with a boy could have walked in a day. The sun was high overhead. It must be well past midday. He was standing on a little dune when he caught a glimpse of a dark object some distance away. By planting his feet one straight before the other he was able to make directly toward what he had seen. It took a long time. Then he was upon it—a man, Bragdon, lying face down, and beside him a smaller shape. Steven turned Bragdon over; he was dead. Whether he had been killed by violence or not Steven did not stop to see, nor note whether he had been scalped before or after death. He tore at the red-and-black serape which covered the smaller shape, uncovering Doren, who lay limp and pale.

But the boy was sleeping. He slept, and the traces of tears coursed grimily down the thin childish cheeks. Steven was dizzy. The whole gruesome world seemed unreal. He raised a tiny tepee over the sleeping boy, with the blanket and a stick he had carried with him into the desert.

Then with his hands he scooped a shallow grave for Bragdon and buried him where he lay. He lifted Doren in his arms, but remembered to give the child a drink lest he should perish of thirst. He opened his gourd, took a drink of the tepid water himself, and slowly poured a generous amount down Doren's throat. The boy gulped and swallowed automatically without opening his eyes.

Steven made, by instinct, toward the spot where he had ascended the sands; that would be the nearest point at which to leave them, surely. He found a few footsteps here and there, but they brought him no nearer the edge of the white desert. Everywhere it seemed to turn up its rim toward the sky and he would turn back baffled and try a bit further along. Some instinct within told him that just beyond were water, shade, rest, where he could lay the burden to which he clung. The gourd slipped unnoticed from his back as he plodded on. Long after all conscious reason had left him, instinct persisted through the delirium of heat and thirst, and he kept on and on, trying to reach the crest beyond which lay a lower, more friendly desert.

He fell often to his knees, rested a moment, rose, tumbled again, and so often as he fell staggered up once more. Again and again he turned

back from the very edge of the drift, blinded, and then retraced his steps. But everywhere he turned a white curtain seemed to hang before him, and in its misty film he saw Consuelo's face as she had looked up at him that night, so whitely in the moonlight of her garden.

A small cavalcade came with leisurely paced gait through the desert, making toward a cool spring which welled in the shade of mesquite shrubbery at the foot of the great table of White Sand. There were perhaps a dozen men and twice as many mules and burros. Don Tiburcio himself rode at the head. His eyes searched the surrounding country, picking out in the mountains beyond certain peaks beneath which lay silver, or so he had been told on his trip north. He wanted to see again, too, the phenomenon of this high white desert, where his men had found water and shade after noon under the low desert palms.

For a long time as his cavalcade approached the sands Don Tiburcio was troubled by a dark object which seemed to move about the gypsum desert's edge, back and forth. He remembered the strange effect of mirage which had so impressed him before and dismissed the apparition as a trick of sun spots, directing his gaze instead

eastward. When he looked again with rested eyes the black moving spot was gone and he made a mental note never again to believe one's eyes on the desert.

The sun was sinking lower, yet the heat of the day was little abated. Soon a swift darkness would fall over mountain and plain. Then nothing could be seen. The moon would rise early, however, and they would be on their way to yon mountains in the cool of the night. The white desert before him glowed rose in the dying sun. It seemed stained in blood. The sun lingered a moment over the peaks that bound the plain to the west and then sank below the jagged monoliths with great speed. Yet the moment before it sank there appeared on the rim of the desert above a figure so clear that before it too sank out of sight Don Tiburcio had halloo'd to his men and was halfway up the slope.

"Estevan, *amigo*; Estevan!" It seemed to Steven Mercer that he had heard a familiar voice commanding him sharply for a long time to wake up, to rouse himself. His eyeballs burned like fire in their sockets. His mouth hurt inside. His skin felt as though every drop of moisture or oil had been burned out of it. Intermittently he felt thus, for cooling streams of water played over

his brow. Was that, too, part of the mirage? he wished it might continue. At length he found strength to pull himself together; with an effort he sat up and by the light of a tula fire he recognized Don Tiburcio. This dazed him and for a moment he grappled with memory, then asked rather, wildly, "Where is the boy?"

"There." Don Tiburcio pointed. Doren lay not far from the fire, which showed him dozing, fresh and placid. Juan sat beside him. "He woke," said Don Tiburcio, "after we had laved him and poured water down him. We have given him burro's milk, wafers. He fell asleep again immediately. And you, *amigo*, how goes it? The glare of that desert has ever driven men mad." Don Tiburcio smiled.

They made Steven sleep again for a few hours. It was decided to cross the mesa that night and to start from the western mountains in the morning, crossing another mesa to the river valley that lay beyond. Twenty-four hours later brought them to a fertile valley, where, it was decided, they would part. Don Tiburcio had decided to return to Santa Fe, after all, and Steven therefore determined to confide Doren to his care. Steven knew that it would please the Mexican greatly to be able to return the boy to his sister. He himself would continue on down to Mexico,

where he would join the movement of Pedraza's sympathizers about which Don Tiburcio had confided to him the details as they rode along together. Perhaps he would make toward the coast, and would fight, a soldier of fortune, with Santa Anna near the coast. From there he could return, across the Gulf to his home, should he survive.

Don Tiburcio tried to discourage this determination. "Do you realize that only in companies do travelers find any safety on this trail? It is a three to four months' journey to Chihuahua and you would travel alone."

"The trappers hunt alone for months at a time and survive for years." Steven shrugged.

"But not down through Chihuahua," Don Anabel insisted. "If you must do it, however, cling close to the Cordilleras, for in the mountains there is always refuge."

Steven was now so removed by time and distance from all hope of the love of Consuelo that to plunge into wars that did not concern him seemed a fine thing. It never occurred to Steven that Consuelo had not meant exactly what she said. He pondered Don Tiburcio's remark, that women did not always mean the firmest thing they said. He wondered if Don Tiburcio were returning with Doren because he wanted to see Hope

Bragdon again, because he still had hopes of her, or to find out if the caravan had come with arms and ammunition. He proposed a rendezvous with Don Tiburcio in Vera Cruz six months from that date, but Don Tiburcio replied that he had an idea their meeting would be much sooner than that and not so far away.

They parted, nevertheless, to go in opposite directions. Doren kissed Steven and clung to him, brushing away his tears. Doren had never spoken of his father but once, and when they had told him why Bragdon was not with them he had turned silently away, his lip quivering. That was all. He could remember nothing that had happened after they had gone up on the White Sands, and did not care to talk about the rest of the trip. He did say once to Steven, "My father thought that if a young boy was with a man Indians would not kill him. They would want to take the boy for an Indian brave when he grew up and they would let the father come along. Don Tiburcio told me so long ago when we were in Santa Fe, and that is why my father would not let me leave him."

And so they parted, waving Steven good-by to the south and hastening their own journey back to Santa Fe.

Some three weeks later the little cavalcade came

clattering down the red trail into Santa Fe, and with little acclaim made haste to the plaza. Halting before the church, Don Tiburcio uncovered his head, as did his men, and it was thus that Father Filemon saw them. Hope Bragdon was not at the ranchito, he told Don Tiburcio, but here in town, staying with the wife of Don Anabel Lopez and the Señorita Consuelo. She had been very ill; was but just able to sit up now after two months in bed.

They took Doren in to see her, Consuelo herself having broken the news gently. Don Tiburcio begged the privilege of taking the boy in, and led Doren up to the bed, brown and rosy as he had never been. Hope opened her arms with a cry and Consuelo ran out, leaving the three together. She almost tumbled over Luis at the door, and pushed him back. "You shan't see her. You shan't see her now."

Luis made no protest. He slunk back unhappily. He had seen that the returning party brought Doren, and Doren only. Luis was different. Since Hope's illness in his father's house he had grown nervous, furtive. There was a time when they thought that Hope would not get well at all. She might die at any moment; the doctor bled her once and seriously considered doing it again if she did not revive, but Felicita,

protesting violently, rushed out and brought an old Indian woman who gave the girl a brew which brought her out of her swoon, and thereafter fed her on broths made of the liver of young veal.

Whether it was genuine love and distress that he felt as Hope lay dying, or merely frustration, the situation was a potent worker of change in Luis. Even Don Anabel could not fail to note the difference in his son. He meditated bitterly upon the irony of both his children being infatuated with these blond foreigners. It had been an act of charity to take the girl from the ranch house. Consuelo had ridden out one day to see the Yankee girl and had found her tossing on the bed with fever, thin to the point of emaciation. Doña Katarina had tried earlier to induce Hope to come in to town and stay with her, but she would not leave the place. She had an idea that Doren might return, might get away somehow and find his way back, and would not know where to look for her. If he came he would be tired out; perhaps ready to die of exhaustion. Doña Katarina had gone with Consuelo, and together they secured an ox cart and with Doña Gertrudis's permission had installed the unconscious girl in Consuelo's own room.

Hope had passed the crisis of her fever, but had been slow and reluctant to convalesce. She did

not care whether she lived or died. At times she seemed touchingly grateful for the care and attention given her, and at other times she accepted it indifferently. Luis came in once to bring her yellow roses. She turned her mournful eyes, made huge with illness and the dark smudges beneath, hopefully toward him. She seemed to remember the evening they had spent together as one of the few bright spots of her new life, and asked him if he would not find her little brother for her. Doña Gertrudis did not realize what a tender heart her son had; with a sob of agony he ran out of the house and disappeared for hours. Hope would never get well; she was grieving her heart out.

Yet in a week after Doren's return the alchemy of happiness had not only raised her from her bed, but had filled out her cheeks, brought a little color to the sweetly curved but prim lips. Then she seemed more alive than she had ever been. It was as though it had taken this terrible anxiety, and the consequent overwhelming happiness of Doren's restoral to her, to break down the cold barriers in her nature. In her gratitude she turned to Don Tiburcio, and scarcely two weeks after Doren's return Hope went with the courtly don to the cathedral, where they were married by Father Filemon Hubert. The padre then gave

them as splendid a dinner as his kitchen could encompass, and when they had paid their respects to Don Anabel and Doña Gertrudis they took Doren and departed southward to select a site for a new hacienda on lands belonging to Don Tiburcio's father within the state of New Mexico.

In parting with Don Anabel, Don Tiburcio informed him that as an evidence of his gratitude to them for their kindness to Hope, he wished to present Don Anabel with a picture which, while it would not take the place of the old master stolen from him, would still be some consolation. It was a Goya, he said, that master of modern Spanish art who had died in Spain only the year before, but whose work was prized highly. Don Tiburcio's father possessed two examples, one of which should be sent to Don Tiburcio on next year's caravan.

Consuelo looked after them, departing so happily, with the feeling that if her happiness had been given for theirs, it had been done by the hand of God through her. And although the man Bragdon had died, Hope and the boy were in reality far better off now. Don Tiburcio was radiantly happy, and the sister and brother were content in the possession of each other.

Though each day Consuelo awoke with a feeling of great loss, she tried not to weep at the

thought of Steven, traveling over the ugly parched plains to Chihuahua, perhaps to death. Perhaps the Indians had already taken him. Against this her heart cried out in disbelief, for youth believes mainly what it wishes most to believe. With her tears prayers were said each day for Steven's safety, and for his return. She knelt longer and more often before the crucifix and little altar in her room than ever before.

Had all her life not been so arrogant, so assured of worship that she could brook no rivalry, no crossing of her will, Consuelo told herself, Estevan should not have departed with no word of appreciation, no sign of love from herself, for this tremendous deed which she had asked of him and upon which he had embarked so unhesitatingly. How could he have done otherwise than he had on the night of their appointed meeting? He could not abandon his countrymen.—Father Filemon prayed with Consuelo that the life of the Americano would be spared and that he might return to Santa Fe.



Chapter X

THE FALSE FRAILE

STEVEN found himself, after parting with Don Tiburcio, in a level valley fertile as an Oriental garden. Fifteen miles of sandy desert lay between the river and the sheer spur of Rockies which they had crossed. This was a desert land, fruitful only where the river flowed, barren save where water touched; but in that rich strip of earth along the river banks were groves of ancient cottonwood. The pink tamarack waved its plumes against the blue sky, and among them nestled many comfortable little ranchos, all Mexican, for the land of the Pueblo Indians had been left far behind along the upper valley of the Rio Grande.

There were other Indians westward, an old Mexican told him. All beyond was the land of the Navajo, a country of a great desert and a vast rift in the earth, greater than any canyon man had ever seen. This painted canyon was near

the Mission of San Xavier del Bac, near the homes of the Moquis, too. A country for one to adventure in.

But Steven's feet were drawn where his heart lay, and, failing that, homeward. Youth and pride and the hopelessness of first love would not let him turn back to Santa Fe, so down to Vera Cruz, whence one could take ship for New Orleans, and so home, he must go. Of the two hundred silver dollars which had remained to him when he set out across the prairies from Independence there still remained one hundred and fifty. For if life were cheap in this land where mankind was so scattered, living cost nothing at all, hospitality was to be had for the asking.

One evening at sunset at a place where the ditch banks burgeoned with flowering locust and the bird-of-paradise tree, Steven came to a low rambling ranch house whose stoutly pillared portal was framed in sweet clematis. The place was like an oasis. He had trotted his weary little mare over many a dusty mile across a sandy arid mesa. It was with relief that he dismounted and took water from a gourd offered by a young girl whose dark beauty was like a madonna's. There was no wife in the house, but the father, a grave, silent man, appeared in the door and offered his house to the strange blond traveler, questioning

neither his name nor his race, his destination nor his business. An older brother to the girl came up to take Steven's horse. He was dark and silent, too, like the father, with a sharp, suspicious gleam in his eye. As they talked, a fraile, or friar, in the habit of a Franciscan, emerged from a wing of the house and joined them with an easy, merry flow of talk.

The fraile was fat and, though well robed, was illy groomed, unshaven, and therefore unpleasant to Steven. Yet in spite of a certain grossness the prelate had charm, wit that was most welcome. When Steven had been shown to a room and had washed away the dust of travel he went outside again and sat with the men beneath the paradise trees, where the fraile talked of many things and held his listeners' attention undiverted. Fray Bartolomeo had been for a number of years in Albuquerque, but he had been recalled, *gracias a Dios*, and was going back to his beloved Mexico.

Fray Bartolomeo rubbed his hands with unaffected gusto when the *mosa* came calling them to dinner. This was but a farmer's house, not that of a poor peon by any means, but a prosperous ranchero, who was called "Don" by his neighbors and servants, but who was not of the Spanish hidalgos, nor made pretense of being. There was plenty of the foods to which Steven had already

become accustomed in New Mexico, but of which he had not eaten in a week, for the poor and the shiftless had little but beans and chili, and night had brought him only to such places heretofore. Here was melon such as he had never known surpassed, soup of strange herbs and greens, filled with balls of finely ground meat rich with chili and mutton fat. There were squashes baked in the outdoor *estufas*, rich and mealy, and little cakes made of corn flour and covered with white honey and chopped piñon nuts.

Fray Bartolomeo ate with a smacking of lips; he leaned over his deep plate and scooped the food untidily into his mouth with wisps of tortilla, although Don José, his host, had two silver spoons set at the plate of each guest. Don José owned a silver bowl and pitcher, and for the rest the reddish earthenware of Mexico. The Madonna-faced girl who ate silently with them rose during the meal and brought in a bowl of luscious grapes, both small and large. Fray Bartolomeo spat the skins on the bare earthen floor, which, though uncarpeted, was scrupulously swept and clean, as was indeed the entire room, with its whitewashed walls and sturdy hand-built furniture.

Don José sent for wine, and poured from the bulging kidskin that was brought in a silver

pitcher full. They quaffed it from gourd cups. The fraile grew red with content and, draining his *copa* at a gulp, passed it back for more. The pitcher was filled again and again, and while the fraile consumed an incredible quantity of wine and the girl carried away the remains of the supper, Don José, his son, and Steven listened to talk of gaming birds, of the virtues of good cooking, and the skill of the Indians at gaming and as silversmiths.

Strange talk from a fraile for pious ears. The lean features of Don José contracted with disapproval, and after the candles had been lit he arose and withdrew. The son remained, held by a gloomy fascination with the conversation, and as the evening wore on Steven himself listened with delight and amazement. Low, unclean, cunning as the fraile showed himself to be, growing less and less careful as he bibbed at the wine, nevertheless he was a man whose knowledge was wide, whose tastes were cosmopolitan.

He was a Cachupin, a Spanish-born resident of old Mexico, and for that reason was being recalled along with the other Spanish born who were to be expelled from the land. He did not make mention of the fact that there were certain charges which he would be compelled to face before his superiors of the Church.

"Yet what difference does it make," he shrugged, "whether I am in Spain or here? One would scarcely know the difference. The same mountains, the same faces, same types. I think the wine of Spain is better, yet the grapes are not so good, so rich." He sighed. "Spain has little gold or silver. No jewels, much as she craves them. Her rubies come from the Orient, her sapphires from France. Mexico has gold and silver, opals and aquamarines, and for precious gems pearls from the Gulf on the western coast.

"But Spain, ah Spain," the fraile sighed with genuine rapture. "There is a finished life. What paintings! Did you know that last year the great Goya died? Never has there been a greater depicter of Spain. For one of his canvases I would give——" His voice died away. But he had been lucky, the fraile said, always lucky. Lucky at cards, lucky in love. To the horrified ears of the two youths he roared of his conquests and spoke of matters beyond their comprehension. And now his luck still held, the babbling tongue went on, for had he not won at cards, from a youth of the Villa, a thousand times the amount of the boy's losses, payment, by an old painting, a priceless canvas which should have gone to the Church, anyway, but which he would sell when he

got to Mexico City, or to Spain. The proceeds would make him rich beyond avarice.

The impious bragging of the prelate, imposing thus on the respect and hospitality due his garb from faithful Catholics, had broken the spell of his speech, and without ceremony the two youths left him, bowed soddenly over the table. Yet the next morning Fray Bartolomeo was brisk and fresh and ready to start forth upon his way. Steven declined his invitation to be a partner on the road as far as El Paso del Norte, where the Cachupin was to join a caravan for safety down the Cordilleras. Steven preferred traveling alone, and made excuse that he was saddle-sore and would remain for a matter of weeks right here.

So the friar rode off and Steven spent a quiet day, resting, getting his linen washed, chatting with the pretty child, winning the sober friendliness of the youth. Don José was gone all day and did not appear until sundown. He had been away looking after his sheep, he said, and brought back a lamb for stewing. With dawn the next morning Steven was on his way. He rode along briskly and uneventfully, mile after mile, passing the laborious oxen and their clumsy carts, and tiny burros laden with vast burdens like moving haystacks. He had received a map from Don

Tiburcio and was making toward the pass of the north, where he would leave the Rio Grande behind and follow the mountains down to Chihuahua.

A well-traveled road lay before him, stretching smooth and hard between rolling dunes where stunted palms and Spanish dagger pricked the desert. Suddenly between the ruts he came upon a body prone, lying with arms outflung beneath its black cassock—the fraile, dead, his glazed eyes staring into the sun. One tale too many the night before. Here was unexpected reprisal far from the scene of some forgotten injury.

Shrinking from the unwelcome office of giving the fraile decent burial, Steven nevertheless pulled at the heavy body that lay as it fell with a knife in the heart. He dragged it to the side of the road, intending to cover it with stones in a sandy grave so that neither coyotes nor wolves could scratch it forth. He owed the fraile that much for what entertainment and information he had yielded him two nights before.

The movement disclosed a long, rolled-up piece of canvas protruding from beneath the cassock of the dead fraile. Steven drew it forth and, loosing the deerskin thongs with which it was bound, unrolled a painting, cracked, old, yet to his eyes undoubtedly beautiful and perhaps of

value. Then in a flash he recognized the painting of the "Madonna and Child" which he had seen upon the wall of the sala in Don Anabel Lopez's house upon his first night in Santa Fe. The talk of the fraile came rushing back to him and he recalled it with new significance. Why had it not occurred to him at the time that this coveted treasure had been dishonestly secured from Santa Fe?

Steven stood in the road for some time, gazing at the painting, putting the story together. Then he rolled the canvas up again, replacing the thong that had bound it. The fraile's care that so valuable a thing should not leave his person had saved the painting, for his mules had either been driven off or had run away by themselves, all his possessions upon them, while this most priceless article had remained concealed beneath his long robes. Whoever had made an end of Fray Bartolomeo had not stopped to touch him or to look for gold or silver upon his person.

Steven tied the roll upon the side of his mare, fastening it to the wrought-leather saddle securely. Then he turned to the fraile. An hour later a fresh heap of stones marked a spot by the roadside and two buzzards appeared high in the sky. Steven straightened up, heaved a thoughtful sigh, and brushed the sweat from his temples.

Mounting his mare, he turned her head about and, pressing his spurs upon her flanks, set off at a canter toward Santa Fe.

It was the only thing to do. He was secretly relieved to have the matter of decision taken out of his hands. There was obviously no one to whom he could safely intrust the return of the canvas. He must take it himself, just as Don Tiburcio de Garcia had taken Doren back to his sister.

Steven returned that night to the house which he had left in the early morning. His reception was gentle and cordial. He told Don José that he had changed his mind and why he was returning to Santa Fe. Don José exchanged a swift look with his son, and nodded to his guest in acknowledgment without changing expression. Steven brought in the roll of canvas, opened and spread it before their gaze. They knelt before its beauty, crossing themselves.

"I am taking it back where it came from," Steven said, simply. Don José gazed at him with a deep, searching look, and the two clasped hands after the manner of the country, left hands upon the other's arm.

Steven thought, "Perhaps they think it was I who stabbed the fraile." But neither would have

told whatever he thought or whoever had done the deed.

Steven came after many weeks to the ford above Albuquerque. "I will not cross here," he thought, "but above, nearest the Sandia Mountains." To the north he could faintly see the tips of the snow-capped peaks that towered above Santa Fe. It was late winter and the giant cottonwoods were turned to copper and polished brass. The nights were cold. Steven was weary of travel alone; he longed once more to be with friends. Adventuring was hard business and he was glad that he was not a trapper, yet the wilderness had forged a claim that he could never forget, upon him, too, a claim that he could never shake off.

He rode along the river bank, thinking of these things, and before he realized it came upon a large hacienda before which lay a garden of at least two *varas*, surrounded by a stout wall, well fortified, and with many outbuildings behind. He was surprised to see so expansive a dwelling here, for there were fewer *ricos* near the town named after the famous Spanish duke than there were at Santa Fe. By rising in his stirrups he could peer over the wall, and in the garden he saw a boy playing, shooting at a target with bow and arrows. It was Doren Bragdon! Steven hal-

loosed, and in a few moments the heavy gate was opened and he rode through to alight before Don Tiburcio and the Señora Garcia.

This was an occasion of great rejoicing. The hacienda was set aflutter with preparations of an honored guest. Don Tiburcio apologized for the meanness of his furnishings; he had been able to procure little there in the territory fit to set up an establishment with. They had built on to an already old and seasoned house, and were still building; Don Tiburcio had already sent a messenger to Mexico for silver and robes and furniture and brocade and the finest tapestries to be procured in the capital. As soon as he and Hope had been married they had come down here. They wished to stay in New Mexico so that Hope would be near to some Americanos.

Hope smiled shyly at Steven. She wore a sapphire that would ransom a General of Mexico; her gown was ridiculously rich to be trailing about in the dust. "But Don Tiburcio will not let me wear gingham," she protested, not pridefully, but in real distress. "Even when I am working I must be dressed in fine clothes."

Don Tiburcio took Steven to a workroom where he had a cabinet-maker carving furniture, and he had engaged an Indian silversmith who was melting up silver to make plates and forks and

spoons and other service worthy of his wife's table.

"Come," said Hope, drawing Steven to one side, "sit here in the garden with me, for I want to tell you something." She was silent for a moment and her eyes were moist. "I owe you everything—all this happiness—Doren, my husband, everything. They have told me, Don Tiburcio, and Doren, too, how you went after my father and how you found them at last. But it is not of that I want to speak, for I can never thank you. I want to talk to you about Consuelo. I know that she sent you to save Doren. She told me when I was ill and so worried. She wanted to give me courage. And it did. To know you had gone after him, it kept me alive. And I cannot forget Consuelo. She loved you, Steven Mercer, when she sent you away; but she thought you didn't care about her.

"Steven, why didn't you go back to her? Why don't you go now, right away? She has been waiting there, eating her heart out, worrying about you, and she feels so badly, Steven, that she sent you away and didn't say she loved you. For she does love you, Steven. She told me so." It embarrassed Hope to speak about love, but she did it with painful honesty.

"I'm going back as fast as I can travel," Steven assured her smilingly.

"Come," said Don Tiburcio, "I see you two Americanos have much to talk about, but I want to show Señor Estevan my store, my warehouse. Did I not tell you," he asked with evident pleasure, as he led the way to the bodegas, "that it would be less than six months and not so far away as Mexico that we should meet? I felt that this would somehow come about."

He showed Steven the grains and wheats, the pelts and hides, with which the bodega was stored. "What do you say, *amigo*, to going into partnership with me here? I will handle whatever goods you wish to import from New Orleans and to pass on to me here, and I will supply you with as much Spanish merchandise from Mexico, with silver ore and gold bullion, as you need to carry on your end of the trade in Santa Fe. There is a great future. Don Anabel Chavez is our greatest competitor; but when he is gone there will be little opposition from Luis, for he is both lazy and incompetent. You can buy as you see fit from incoming traders. You can collect furs. The fur business has definitely been transferred from the Northeast to the Southwest and for a number of years the Rocky Mountain Company will be the richest field for hunter and trapper. There

is room for many here. Let us, too, build up a business in this country. What do you say, my friend?"

Steven was radiantly pleased. Here was the opportunity to trade in a big way. He could show his father that capital was available without asking a dollar from Mercer & Co. He could trade, buying his own cargo and paying for it. He could build up a great business. His dreams soared, all before he had answered Don Tiburcio de Garcia.

"That I'll do, señor," he responded.

"Let us strike hands on the bargain, then," the Mexican proposed. "You are going on to Santa Fe? Good. I shall follow you there within a week or so and we will complete the details. I shall finance the caravan loads that come from St. Louis each year."

Steven slept in a wide fresh room, with linen sheets upon a hair mattress, such luxury as he had not known in months. He left shortly after his breakfast and departed right merrily, while Doren and Hope would not say good-by, but *hasta la vista* (till we meet again).



Chapter XI

TREASURE TROVE

DOÑA GERTRUDIS sat before a great log fire, drawing the threads in a new altar cloth. The work was to be like lace and gossamer and would be weighted with silver thread. Tilted back against the wall in his chair, Manuel strummed a *guitarro*, lightly, oh, very lightly, and essayed his new *copleta*—two such pretty stanzas. Was Consuelo going to object to this?

He darted an eye in her direction, but she sat quietly on her bench, slowly sipping her chocolate; in fact, she was even tapping slightly with her toe in time to the tinka-tink, atink-atink. Relieved, Manuel threw back his head, closed his eyes, and abandoned himself to the soul of music that burned within him. Ah, it was delightful to sing of love. Especially now that Consuelo did not interrupt him all the time. Really, he was becoming quite fond of his cousin, and coming to enjoy

being with her. Whereas before, when he loved her, *Dios*, what torment; and no musical expression at all.

As for Consuelo, she was glad to be allowed to concentrate upon her own thoughts. In reality life was not at all the simple and boring thing she had once thought it. Safe and sheltered this valley had always been in their lifetime. Tales of Indian massacre beyond the mountains, or over the deserts lying between them and far Chihuahua—they had never touched her. Like wars far away. She had thrilled with horror to hear of them, but they did not touch her life. Yet tragedies were going on all around them all the time.

What was Ess-tevan suffering now? Lightly she had sent would-be suitors off on the long march to Chihuahua through which a lover proved his mettle, and although Steven had not been lightly sent, she had not realized to the full what such a journey might mean. Now she could picture all the hardships and tortures of which she had heard. Perhaps he would never come back and they would never again have word of him or know what had been his end. This thought was too much for her and she wept into her chocolate, so that the spoonful which she took to cover her emotion was very salty. This made her smile. Even upon the verge of one's

seventeenth birthday one cannot be forever repenting, forever gloomy. There are moments in between remorse and an aching heart when coral earrings, a new shawl, the gossip of one's girl friends, no longer torture, but give relief.

So, although her cheeks were flushed and her eyes unusually bright, both were dry when Consuelo jumped up to welcome Anita de Guevara. She greeted her warmly with a kiss on either cheek. Had Consuelo heard, Anita began at once, of the magnificent new establishment that Don Tiburcio had built on the Rio Grande for the Americana he had married? No? They said it was to be furnished with naught but carved woods from Spain, and every bit of the table silver was to be made in Salamanca and imported!

"Oof! I do not believe that!" protested Doña Gertrudis.

Anita leaned closer to Consuelo. "Is it true what they are telling of Luis?" she whispered.

"What are they telling?" demanded Consuelo, hotly, a trifle faintly.

"That he has turned Penitente. That he no longer games or diverts himself."

Consuelo was saved from making any reply to this question by the entrance at that moment of Don Anabel, who came in, as always, with a

manner of distinction and ceremony, bowing carefully to each of the ladies, maintaining the traditions of that chivalry of the land of Cervantes brought to New Spain by his forefathers.

"What have you learned of the painting?" asked Anita of Don Anabel, the business of saluting all the company in the room being concluded. Anita always asked the most unfortunate questions. Don Anabel became obsessed whenever the painting was mentioned. "Nothing that can give me hope for its recovery," he replied. "Rather to the contrary. You may remember," he turned to Doña Gertrudis, "that of the suspects among those who had left Santa Fe during the week when Murillo disappeared (he always referred to the picture as the Murillo), suspicion pointed to the Americano who accompanied the last caravan and who remained here after it returned (as though everyone present did not know Steven perfectly without such careful identification).

"Today I learned that this young man departed the Villa at night. And furthermore that he was seen to vault the wall of our lower garden earlier on that same night, to remain inside the space of twenty minutes or so." A clatter of amazement and discussion pro and con broke forth. Presently Consuela made herself heard, almost timidly.

("What a change has come over *la gattita*," thought Anita, "the little cat who was always throwing out sparks.")

"But papa, the Americano was seen by Don Tiburcio way south *en route* to Chihuahua. It was he who saved Doren, the Yanqui's boy. He would not be likely to be guilty of stealing then, would he?" Consuelo looked about the room for confirmation.

"That is another matter," Don Anabel decided. "Of course he would succor his countryman. But to take a valuable painting is another thing. Yes, I think he might well do both." As Don Anabel finished speaking, old Angel appeared in the door with a letter for *el padron*. He brought it to Don Anabel and there was a moment's silence while it was read. Don Anabel rose to his feet, his lean brown cheeks alternately flushing and paling, and informed the startled company, "Quite apropos of our conversation comes this letter, from the gentleman himself—Señor Estevan Mercer." (Don Anabel almost hissed the name.) "He has at this moment returned to Santa Fe, brought by his conscience or his need, who can say, and he brings me back my canvas."

"Tst, tst, tst! *figure-se*; imagine," clucked Doña Gertrudis. "What does he say, then?"

"This." Don Anabel opened the sheet which

he still held in his hand and read aloud: "My Very Dear Sir: I have but just returned to Santa Fe, and bear with me your lost painting. At least, if I mistake not, it belongs to you," ("The impudence of the rascal! Belongs to me indeed!") "I am changing my clothes and refreshing myself somewhat from the fatigue and dust of the journey, but immediately thereafter I shall personally restore the picture to your house, if that is your wish."

"*Por los santos!*" Don Anabel exclaimed, "but this fellow has assurance. I'll go fetch it myself, if this is not but a ruse. He is at Doña Katarina's house." Don Anabel threw on his black cloak, and stopping for a moment in his office, went forth from the front door.

Consuelo was trembling; her hands and feet were like ice, her face flaming. She could scarcely maintain her composure. In the general chatter and excitement which followed Don Anabel's astounding message she slipped unnoticed to her room, where Felicita was building up her mistress's fire.

"Felicita, he has returned! Ess-tevan. And he brings my father's picture. How he found it I do not know. But here he is, and my father is again accusing him of the theft of it. He has gone off in haste to get his painting, his treasure.

I should have told him at once, but I could not there before them all. That would have been worse for my father than never to have regained the picture. I must go tell him now. Quick; come with me. Perhaps we can overtake him." She threw a black reboso over her head, and with Felicita close upon her heels fled through the garden and out the side gate.

But it was already too late. By the time she reached Doña Katarina's house, on foot, she saw her father emerging from the door. Felicita pulled her back. Instinctively they drew out of sight. She would have to tell Don Anabel when he returned home. Alas, poor Steven! what had her father said? Then a new thought struck her with cold terror. "Alas! *pobre de mi*, what will Ess-tevan think of me that I did not at least defend him? Does he know?" They crept back through the little lanes.

Steven had just stepped from the vast copper kettle which the good Doña Katarina supplied him for the bath and was joyously rubbing himself dry after his first hot scrub in a month, when there came a knock upon his door. The *criada*, a slovenly girl, called through the door that it was Don Anabel and his attendant without. If they would please sit down, Steven called back.

With glad anticipation he hurried into his clothes. The painting was then as valuable as he had thought it might be, and here was Don Anabel himself come to thank him! Good.

Shortly the door of Steven's chamber opened and Don Anabel was confronted with a stalwart young man, ruddy with health, his skin golden with the varnish of sun and desert, his hair still damp and wavy. He was smiling with assurance, the unconscionable rogue, apologizing for his lack of jacket or coat, and bowing as though in anticipation of warm greetings. Don Anabel arose and stood stiffly erect, his hand on his hip.

"Do I understand you rightly that you have with you my Murillo, my sacred painting?" His nostrils dilated with nervous tension as he hung on Steven's affirmation.

"Yes, señor, I have it."

Don Anabel glared coldly at the baffled young man. "What, may I ask, is your price for the safe restoral of the painting?"

"What do you mean? I do not understand you," Steven stammered.

"Your price?" the Don repeated. "Whatever it is I shall deliver it in consideration of the safe restoral." The young man made no answer and Don Anabel continued, coldly and deliberately, "If the canvas is returned unharmed you will be

permitted to leave Santa Fe without question or arrest. On the condition that you never attempt to return here," quoth Don Anabel.

With a lofty disregard that matched the New Mexican's own, Steven ignored the imputation carried by the words—though indeed he had been actually arrested before on suspicion of espionage—and faced the wily older man with wits sharpened by his struggle with the desert these last months.

"Señor"—he looked squarely at Don Anabel—"I expect to be returning to Santa Fe every year, perhaps twice a year, with a caravan of goods. I do not intend to be bullied out of a business field that is extended to others. Is it possible that you are afraid of the advent of Americans?"

"In my country gentlemen do not ask requital for the return of property. But as that seems to be the custom here I shall make my demands, too. I must exact the right of unmolested commerce here or I shall not answer for the safe delivery of the painting." Steven's voice trembled with anger. Only rage at the treatment he had received from the autocrat before him, overlord of lands that were equal to a kingdom, spurred him to use the painting as a club over Don Anabel's head. The threat was effective.

Don Anabel would take no chances with the

loss or mutilation of his treasure. He credited Steven with a faculty for plotting that he did not possess. If it were himself, he would have arranged that the painting be out of reach of its owner; he could not have believed that it lay on a chest in the adjoining room. He inclined his head in consent.

"*Muy bien*, since you put it that way. I myself will not oppose your trade here further, and I fancy the *jefe politico* will not of his own accord. The painting?"

Steven called the *criada*, who brought in from his bedchamber a roll of deerskin. Don Anabel seized it, unfastened the wrappings with trembling fingers, and unrolled the canvas, stretching it out before the candles that burned on the mantle.

"The Murillo. Unharméd. *Gracias a Dios!*" Without another word Don Anabel, gesturing to his servant, rolled up the picture again, thrust it beneath his arm, and pulling his cloak tight about him, turned his back upon Steven and strode toward the door. The *moso* threw upon the floor at Steven's feet a sack that struck the boards with the unmistakable clink of *moneda*, Spanish duros, sesterces, and reales.

Then Steven's gorge rose and he shouted, "Stop!" with such suddenness and passion that

Don Anabel paused in his tracks. Steven kicked the sack with a rage that shot it straight after the servant and hit him amidships in the rear with such violence that he staggered and plunged forward against the wall.

"Hold!" yelled Steven. "Take your filthy silver out of here, Señor Don Anabel Lopez! I turned back on my way to Chihuahua, retracing my steps over mountain passes and through deserts, to return to you this painting, which I recognized as having seen in your house. I found the canvas on the dead body of a prelate, late of Albuquerque, where, señor, he told me, a night or so before his demise, he had acquired the canvas.

"Believe this tale or not, as you like, but, by the saints, you shall make apology for the accusation of theft. Look nearer home for your crime. If you do not take back your words, I shall spread a tale in Santa Fe that will somewhat tarnish the luster of your honored name."

Steven stopped abruptly. He had not intended to say that. He had no proof that Luis was responsible for Bragdon's death, though it was tacitly understood between Juan and himself that it was he who had dispatched the murderers on the Yankee's trail. He had no proof that it was Luis who had stolen his father's painting and

gambled it away. A terrible silence had fallen upon the room. Don Anabel's face grew old and drawn. He looked gaunt and thin and sick, as he stood there in his dark cloak, the candlelight throwing a heroic black silhouette against the whitewashed wall. Terrible suspicions had entered his mind. To what did the American refer? He was not sure.

Then the face of the boy before him broke into a disarming smile. "Señor, I am sorry. I did not mean that. Here, shall we not both retract what we have said? Surely you owe me something for having restored your treasure to you? And, after all, why should I have come back if theft were my purpose?"

But Don Anabel was already convinced—forced, in spite of himself, to recognize the *caballero* in another. A younger man of a hated race, he could not let the youth outdo him in courtesy. He capitulated with the grace of which he was master. "Señor Mercer," he replied with an inclination of his head, "it is as you say. I have the honor, señor, to request that you will give us the pleasure of dining with us tomorrow night? It is too late for our kitchen this evening, I fear."

That would be a great pleasure, Steven replied with an imperturbability that belied the excite-

ment he felt. He accepted the long-coveted invitation not with the unalloyed pleasure which he had thought would be his, but with a burning desire to see Consuelo and to find out for himself whether she, too, had suspected him—whether she had had faith in him. Don Anabel took his departure and Steven sat down to his supper and to thoughts of Consuelo. When he saw her again it would be with a knowledge that he had not had before, if what Hope had told him was still true. He burned to make sure that Consuelo had trusted him, for, after all, he told himself, she knew very little of him.

Doña Katarina knocked and entered, bearing a fowl still sizzling from the spit. Steven had been much pleased to find his good landlady returned from Taos, and they chatted now of all that happened during Steven's absence. Steven told Doña Katarina what had passed between himself and Don Anabel, inquiring if there had been talk in Santa Fe of the loss of the painting. "But yes"—she spread her hands—"of course. What would you? Don Anabel has been near frantic, and all Santa Fe has been busy with the mystery of the theft of the holy painting. Some think that it served the don right for not having presented the painting to the Church long since.

"After you left—the latest massacre would

have been as nothing. They talked of nothing but the Madonna and the news that the Yankees had packed their wagon wheels with the silver they gained in trading in Santa Fe. Think of that, to escape the *impuestas*, the duties!" Doña Katarina threw back her head and laughed the rich husky laugh of the full-throated Mexican matron.

Steven grinned unabashedly with her. "But how was it found out? I am curious to know. It was well done. I know, for I helped them do it!"

"Hu!" Doña Katarina laughed till she must hold her sides, and the tears streamed down her cheeks. "Hu-hu! They were held up by Santa Feans, just beyond Raton Pass." Between her gusts of mirth he learned that as the wagons went bounding over the ruts the axle of one of them broke, and the rim of a wheel came off, disclosing cavities within rim and hub that were filled with silver. No! the Santa Feans did not get it. The Yankees got away, after all.

Steve heaved a sigh of satisfaction and returned to his own matters. "But about the painting? And my departure? Did they, did anyone ——?"

"But yes, I tell you." Doña Katarina nodded vigorously. "It was the talk of the town. Of

course I knew, and Consuelo without a doubt knew, that you had nothing to do with its disappearance."

Steven sat thoughtfully before the fire that night, too tired to go out in search of company, and gave himself over to thought. It was more than a year since the tall, hatchet-faced refugee from Mexico's perilous presidential chair had walked into his father's office and commissioned him with an errand which had started him on a twelvemonth of perilous adventuring. What was it, he mused, that should make him stray from the great business in New Orleans that was his by inheritance, to set his heart upon a pioneer undertaking so far from his people? What held Pierre Lafitte and brought him back to his trapping after a lifetime, almost, of solitude, and labor for which he was illy repaid? All the pioneers who dared the desert, the enmity of the Indians, the freezing passage of the Rockies in winter, were not landless and penniless when they started forth.

"One might as well ask the buffalo why they migrate, or the birds of passage," St. Vrain had said. "It's instinct. Mankind has it almost as strong as the fourfooted or the birds. They want land, room to breathe. It's only the daring and the brave who blaze trails, who strike out for

new business where there's room and they won't be crowded out. Only the red-blooded can survive against the odds on the frontier."

These words came back to Steven with force as he thought about the agreement he had made with Don Tiburcio de Garcia. Well, he felt fit to tackle the Trail and survive, and he would not be forced from the territory as long as others could hold their own in this New World, held by a handful of haughty Spanish and a horde of red men.

No, he would stay, and—and marry, and bring up a family in this land. Mexico? What line across the mountain said that here the English-speaking should stop and forever keep to the other side? The land should belong to those who would build it. And so Steven fell asleep, dreaming of empire and of a piquante face peering over a tipsy balcony in the moonlight.

At that precise moment Consuelo was facing her father in his study. Don Anabel's voice was shaken. "You mean, Consuelo, that you actually saw Luis hand a long object like this"—he held up the rolled canvas which he had not yet had time to restore to its frame—"out the window to some other waiting there?"

"Precisely, papa. I would swear it was that.

I have told you exactly. In justice to Señor Estevan. I think Luis has been protected long enough."

"It is as I feared," Don Anabel muttered. "But I did not think, I really did not think, that Luis would have stooped to such an act; that he could be led to this. *Ingrato!* It is fortunate indeed that no word of this has gotten through Santa Fe." He felt peculiarly humbled, and at the mercy of this young American who might so easily put his son to public shame. Don Anabel lashed himself into a proud fury. Consuelo drew herself up on tiptoe with her hands on his shoulders and kissed him tenderly. "See, papa, you have the Murillo back again now. And it is Ess-tevan who has thus served you, even after he had been thrown in the *carcel* and attacked. It is done and over. Let us forget. Luis will have learned his lesson."

"I could never forget." Don Anabel shook his head angrily. "My son!"

Supper had been brilliant. Lupe had done herself proud with the dishes. Everyone was in sparkling humor. Don Anabel because the Murillo once more glowed richly from its frame against the whitewashed wall, Doña Gertrudis because Don Anabel was pleased. It was Sun-

day, a feast day, and the Lenten fast was therefore broken for the week with several kinds of meat and game, with sweets, fresh water cress, and coffee that caused Doña Gertrudis to sigh in ecstasy.

Consuelo was *echando rayos*, (throwing out sparks), as the saying went. Steven was likewise in glowing humor. He was the lion of the occasion. He had been pressed until he had told and retold the adventures of his trip south and what befell him on the road back. But of the fraile and his story of the painting not a word was said; Don Anabel had heard all that the evening before, and had told his family, presumably, for the subject was tacitly and widely avoided by all. Luis alone was not one with the merry company about the table. He was quite different from his old, teasing, swaggering self. Preoccupied, self-centered still, he nevertheless hung nervously upon his father's words. He gave a grave attention to Steven's talk, was courteously, coolly attentive. He ate little, and drank not at all. Consuelo herself wondered what had come over Luis.

Could it be true what Anita de Guevara had whispered to her yesterday afternoon? Had Luis reformed and turned Penitente? She shuddered at the thought of that stern brotherhood, unrecognized child of the Church, whose members in-

flicted torturous penance upon themselves in imitation of the sufferings of Christ and the martyrs. She searched Luis's face earnestly; but behind his unlined youthful features she could read nothing. He had been away a great deal of late, but he would tell her nothing. She had yearned over Luis, prayed for his salvation, worried over his comings and goings.

But tonight Ess-tevan commanded her full attention. Here he was seated at her father's table, a thing she had thought would never come to pass. She would tell him afterwards how she repented her proud and hasty words that night in the garden. How wicked she had been to have kept silence about the painting all the time he was away. Surely Ess-tevan would understand how terrible it would have been to have had her father know all the time that it was Luis who had stolen his picture. Especially while it was still missing. What he would have done with Luis she did not know. And had she not given her solemn word to Luis not to betray him? At the time it had seemed the only thing to do.

Whenever Steven could do so without anyone else observing, his eyes questioned Consuelo. She became nervous. Thereafter the meal passed as in a haze. She could scarcely wait until it was over and she might have the opportunity to talk

with Señor Ess-tevan. At length Don Anabel arose. He passed around the table to assist his wife, a deference he always practiced when company of any distinction was present. As he waited behind her chair he rested his hand upon his son's shoulder, as though in a return to his old affection. Luis winced involuntarily, but so slight was the movement that none but an expectant eye would have noted it. As Don Anabel's hand was withdrawn from his son's shoulder a crimson stain showed faintly where it had rested. The stain spread ever so slightly on his cloth bolero and a tiny vivid streak appeared on the white linen shirt showing beneath.

Consuelo, sitting opposite Luis and next to Steven, watched the spot, fascinated, unconscious horror in her face. She recovered as Don Anabel drew out his wife's chair and followed her from the room. Had he noticed Luis's shirt? Had anyone else noticed? Luis rose and, throwing his poncho over his shoulder, followed the guest of the evening out of the dining room. He did not join the family in the sala, excusing himself at the doorway. After taking coffee with the others before the fire, Don Anabel had retired to his *despacho*, where the business of the haciendas was attended to, and still sipping another cup of the coffee, Doña Gertrudis, who had long since

passed the point of stimulation with the cup, dozed off into a comfortably drugged state.

Consuelo sat opposite Steven, alone; chap-eroned, but not too well. She looked timidly at the big fellow standing astride the buffalo rug before the fire. He had grown taller since she last saw him and had filled out with muscle. Consuelo felt no longer that sense of power which always had made her mistress of a situation. She was trembling.

Stevan came over to her bench and stood beside it, looking down upon her. "May I sit beside you, señorita?"

She made room for him and they looked into the fire for a space.

"I have come, as you know, from Don Tiburcio and the Señora Garcia," he began at length, awkwardly. "My countrywoman told me how kind you were to her while she was ill."

"We did very little," Consuelo murmured. "We owed her a great deal more."

Neither of them spoke, embarrassment tying their tongues, then Consuelo echoed softly, "And we owe you still more."

They both looked up to where above the mantel Don Anabel's prized painting hung. The old master stood forth with great beauty against the

austere whiteness of the wall. This brought Steven to the point.

"Señorita"—he looked directly at her—"you did not think, after I left, that I had anything to do with the disappearance of your father's painting?"

"No, no, Señor, Ess-tevan. How could I? Had I not known you in the least I could not have thought such a thing, when you were going off so magnificently to save the Americans."

"Nor when I came back with the painting and your father thought I had surely got possession of it somehow and taken it away?" He leaned toward her, his eyes eager, his whole attitude one of waiting to hear her defense of him. He laid a hand over hers. Happiness swam before him. Dared he take her in his arms, here?

"No, no, if you had not taken it you had not. Because you brought it back proved nothing but your generous service. I would never have believed such a thing. Besides, I *knew*, Ess-tevan, that *you* could not have taken it, for I saw another do that, though at the time I did not know what was being taken."

"You saw—another?" Steven faltered, in surprise. "But you did not tell your father, when there was all this talk, after I left, that I was the thief?"

The words fell in complete silence. Consuelo looked away, her face burning. No words came to her, now that the fearful moment had come. This was not going as she had dreamed, this meeting. For months she had prayed just to have the chance to ask forgiveness of Steven for her proud manner on the night that she had sent Steven off on his journey. And not a word of his love had he mentioned. Did he not care any more whether or no she loved him? He was looking at her now with hurt surprise.

"You saw some one else take the picture," he was repeating, incredulously; a dull red mantled his forehead, his boyish face was stubborn and hurt. "You knew who did it, and yet you let your father and all this town, where I expected to build up a business in trade, you let them believe that I was a common thief?"

Consuelo looked wildly at him. Tears started in her eyes, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth as he stammered mercilessly on: "And I can say nothing. I can imagine who took your painting. The fraile told me how he got it. And you, señorita, on the very night that you sent me to risk my life in the desert, not because of the poor little lad or a hated Yank, nor for the sake of the girl, but to save your brother's soul—after

that you kept silence about why I entered your garden. You did not tell who took the painting?"

All the pent up thoughts of his months alone on horse, riding with only thoughts for company, came out in the deluge of unaccustomed speech.

"Oh, Ess-tevan, I could not tell," Consuelo implored, forcing her words as he stopped talking. "It would have broken my father's heart. I—I had promised not to tell. I—I did not know you would come back this way, even. I prayed, I thought, something would happen meanwhile."

"It has," Steven answered, coldly, bowing and reaching for his hat. "Señorita, I have the honor to bid you good night. Will you extend my thanks and farewell to your so generous parents?" He found himself walking out through the door into the chill of the night air. His emotions were at a white heat of rage, or was it that he was stone cold?

He did not seem to know exactly what he was doing. Only he felt an alien chill against all that had drawn him back to the Villa. He strode down the dark narrow street, feeling his way by familiar walls and posts, till he came to Doña Katarina's house.

"Juan," he called, for the man had returned to him the night before, "get the horses and the mules, ready to leave for Taos the first thing in

the morning." He went into his room and proceeded to pack everything he owned. When all was strapped and ready he laid out his buckskin clothes and went to bed. Strangely he slept. His body and his emotions were tired, and he was young. But he had shut his mind in a coldly determined way.

Consuelo did not sleep till toward dawn. When Steven had seized his hat and stalked out of the room she could scarcely credit it. She stood before the fireplace, clenching and unclenching her hands, raging after her old fashion. Gradually she quieted and utter misery engulfed her. Doña Gertrudis awakened. With forced calm Consuelo delivered Steven's message and then bade her mother good night.

When she reached her room a storm of tears broke and she wept for hours. Felicita stayed with her, and at length, when she had spent her strength, she sent the tired woman to bed, but Felicita lay down upon the floor at her side and would not leave her. Reason began to function in the early hours of the morning and Consuelo realized that the Americano, too, had his pride.

"Because he was always so amiable I did not realize how it would hurt and anger him to be suspected and to know that I could have stopped it," she told herself, finding her only consolation

in justifying him. "I will go to him myself in the morning," she decided at last, as light was beginning to break in the east, and fell asleep.

The sun was already well up when Consuelo awoke. She dressed hurriedly and, leaving her chocolate untasted, hastened out through garden and toward the cathedral, which she would pass on her way to Doña Katarina's house. She entered the church for a moment's prayer, and as her black reboso disappeared within the door a horseman stopped outside the cathedral, hesitated for a moment at the foot of the steps. Then, with a quick gesture of determination he slapped his mare's flank and rode on through the town, followed by his Indian attendant.

When Consuelo came out a few minutes later there was no one to be seen on the street, and when she arrived at Doña Katarina's she learned that it was too late.



Chapter XII

SILVER CARAVANS

JUAN and Steven stood upon a desolate hillside, and from behind the stunted cedar and pines looked down upon a strange scene. Juan had ridden somewhat out of the way on the trail to Taos, and had led Señor Estevan up to this mount from which he could see in a small valley below them a group of people clustering about a small adobe building.

"Look!" pointed Juan. "Listen! It is the *pito* (the flute)."

On the cold clear air a thin, sweet, flute-like piping arose to them. A little man down in the valley emerged from the house, carrying a book, which he held open before him, and from which he read aloud as he walked along. He was followed by one who played the flute, and behind him came a small procession, not more than five

or six men, who wore masks, but who were bare to the waist, wearing nothing but white trunks. The men were striking themselves rhythmically across their backs with great whips, which were wetted from time to time in a bucket of brine carried alongside by another man. In a moment blood began to flow down their backs and the cotton trunks turned red. Steven looked away, shuddering, but in a low voice Juan once more called his attention to the religious ceremony below them.

“Señor, but look, Señor!”

Steven again looked down. The procession was winding along a rocky thorn-strewn trail beneath them, quite near, and following those that smote themselves with the thorny whips came another, bearing upon his back a heavy wooden cross. He lifted his face, and Steven recognized Luis Lopez. Juan pulled Steven back out of sight. They retraced their path and came out upon a main road where they had left their pack mules hobbled. Juan pulled and rode beside Steven.

“It is the Penitentes, señor, Los Hermanos De Luz, the Brothers of Light. I wanted you to see with your own eyes. Don Luis is of them; he has turned Penitente. This is the Holy Week, you know.”

“It was very old, this custom,” Juan continued.

It had come with the first Spaniards; sometimes an Indian had been Penitente, but rarely. Long ago the Pecos Indians, of the ruined pueblo one passed on the Trail to Santa Fe,—did he remember?—had made sacrifices, it was said. But they were Aztecan; they worshiped differently. Still the Pecos tribes kept a sacred fire burning in the mountains, while the other Pueblos did not. Juan said no more and they rode on in silence.

A queer land, thought Steven. Luis could kill a man, steal, murder, and then atone by repenting in secret, whipping himself hideously. Oh, well, what did it matter now to him whether Luis repented or not? Steven could not understand this land. It was old, mysterious, and unfriendly. Yet in spite of his depression his whole nature responded to the mountains. They had lingered for four days among the hills, hunting. Spring was faintly burgeoning. The trees were ready to burst into bud, the air that blew down from the snow-capped peaks to the north carried that rare headiness that comes from beyond the timber line.

They shot a huge lobo (wolf) on the way and Steve turned it over to Juan for a robe. At the end of the fifth day they rode up through the deep arroyo that lies in the plain this side of Taos Valley, and trotted along through fertile farms into the tiny town. They made straight to the

house where Colonel Ceran St. Vrain and Charles Bent lived, and there found young John Smith, Kit Carson, and a dozen long-haired trappers, guides, and hunters, among them his old friend Pierre Lafitte, who welcomed Steven right joyously. They sat up half the night, smoking, talking of the winter's kill, and what promise the spring held.

"What have you been doing all these winter months, since last I saw you?" asked Ceran St. Vrain.

Steven told him of the trip south and its object. Ceran nodded.

"You could have done nothing else—nothing better, for that matter."

"What was that southern country like and how did the streams run?" asked Kit. He had been down there once, in the Black Mountains, and he drew a map in the dust with his finger nail. Now what he wanted to know was, did this here river drean down into this here valley, and from where did that thar small stream take its course?

Steven blushed. He had not located himself very well as he went. He was afraid he had not fixed the lay of the land in his mind, except for the valley of the Rio Grande.

"Pshaw!" said Kit. "You will never make a good scout if you don't learn the mountains and

the valleys, and the waterways especial. You've got to fix them all in your mind's eye; then you never get lost. How did you ever get out of them White Sands you tell about, I wonder."

"I didn't," Steve admitted, shamefacedly. "I went round and round after I reached right to the edge, so they told me, till finally de Garcia saw me and came up after us. I thought all the time that this white desert kept right on going, as I remember."

The trappers nodded sympathetically. "That's the desert for you. Mirage. In the mountains, now, you know where you're at. Somethin' to go by." There was talk of traps and furs and how the Hudson Bay Company had lost out since the Rocky Mountain Fur Company had taken hold, and there was wonder what that country was like, way to the northwest, that the folks who had taken the Oregon Trail had struck out for.

John Smith said he met a French hunter in the mountains by the Red River, who said that there was an inland sea up north that was as briny as the Atlantic. "Well, you'd have to swallow that with a little salt," spoke up Steven. There was a hearty guffaw, and St. Vrain silenced them with the withering retort that he not only believed it, but that he knew a man who had come across the hull of a Dutch ship, big as Columbus had

used, stranded right in the midst of the desert, a hundred miles above the Gulf. Now what did they make of *that*?

"Nuthin'," meditated John Smith. "No more'n a stranger could make of the millions of tons of buffalo bones what you see bleachin' on the prairies."

Someone burned a hole with a hot coal, with which he was lighting a pipe, and St. Vrain turned to Steven. "That reminds me, lad, when you return with your first caravan, bring a lot of those amusing little fire sticks, like the Yankees had. Matches. Some of them were no good at all, but the first lot set fire at the first scratch, and burned finely. They're a great thing, I think, and I wouldn't be surprised if some day no one would be without 'em."

"I'll send you back some," Steven replied. "I'll ship them from New York if New Orleans hasn't got any yet. But I've decided not to come back myself."

"What?" said St. Vrain, in astonishment, "Why, I thought it was all settled. Surely you don't mean it, lad. I shall be very sorry."

"But I do," said Steven. "I have not seen my father and mother for a year, nor heard from them. After all, my father has built up a business, which he wishes his son to carry on. My

place is there, where a great house known by the name I bear is already established."

"That's just it," said St. Vrain, sagely. "It's all ready made. You had no hand in it. Here is something you can do yourself. Your father has a partner, hasn't he? And you can see him from time to time? Many have made their pile in the fur business and then retired. But they've helped to build up the country and the trade meanwhile. Trade, my lad, is the life of any country. Why hasn't this land of New Spain grown any more in the three hundred odd years since the Spanish Conquistadores found it and settled it? No trade with outside countries. That's why. That's what builds any country up. Trade brings in new life."

But Steven was determined. He would have to go north the day after the next, then, St. Vrain told him. He could go with Kit there, and join the party setting out from Bent's Fort next month. They were going out to Leavenworth and another return caravan would follow back on the Trail in June. Steven said he would be ready to go with Kit.

Twenty-four hours later he was still of the same mind. And yet there was a strange ache in his breast. He sat with St. Vrain before the big fireplace. Tall Indians from the near-by pueblo

which he had passed on his first trip to Taos in the fall stood around the wall, stately men, wearing their white deerskin robes, almost as an Arab wears his burnoose. One of them came over to Steven and showed him a tiny wagon which he had wrought out of silver—a little covered wagon. Steven gave the Taos artificer twice its weight in silver for the piece; the Indian was delighted.

"A silver wagon," said St. Vrain. "That's just a sample, silver caravans, one after another, that's what that represents. Not only the hub and the linings of the wheels silver, but the goods inside." He nudged Steven in an aside, for there was in the room a mixed company of Taos Indians, Mexicans from San Fernando de Taos, French trappers in the employ of the Bents, all eating, drinking, smoking.

"Had you heard about the hold-up of the Yankee caravan?"

Steven told him he had through Doña Katarina, upon her return from seeing her husband off on his spring round of the traps.

"That's going to make it harder for the traders this next year. We need a friend in Santa Fe, Steven, my friend."

"There's Don Tiburcio just below," Steven reminded him. "He wants to establish himself at Albuquerque. He has gold to invest. I have two

sacks of his money for the trade. . . . Ah, here's Kit."

Young Carson had come in with a swarthy Frenchman, a lean, flashing hunter who might have been one of the Indians themselves except for his gayety and his mustachios. He laughed and sang as he flung down his pack and soon was tearing at his meat with gleaming teeth, half starved from the long trail just covered.

"Thou, Etienne," said St. Vrain in French, "when will you have tired of living the life of the *engagé*, hunting, trapping? For three winters now, is it not?"

Etienne smiled back in perfect good nature, "Never, I think, my friend, though some day duty may recall me. I think your mountains have got hold of me. Their clutch is stronger than that of the vigilants of the French Republic."

Steven looked sharply at him. The man had indeed the look of the French noble house of Napoleonic sympathies.

"Etienne was a French colonel of the Guards," explained St. Vrain. "Something happened in his life. He came to this country, as you see, down the Mississippi, over the plains, and he cannot break himself away."

A great weight was on Steven's chest. He thought perhaps he was going to be ill. Never

did he remember having had such a feeling of depression. This was the last night he should spend with this company. These daring, free, wild, fearless men, rich and uncouth, sharing a common love for the grandeur of the mountains, speaking the same tongue, understanding the silence of the timber-line heights—was he never to mingle with them again? Had he lived and dared throughout the past twelvemonth just to go away, now that he had become one with the life? St. Vrain broke in on his thoughts.

“This Steven has grown two inches this year, I swear,” said he, “and see how thick through the chest the man is.” He no longer called him lad, thought Steven, “This life has made a man of him. Here’s where he belongs.”

Unable to bear his heavy chest in company any more, Steven got up and went out. He paced up and down in the moonlight, and his thoughts were of the girl he had left standing before her hearth but a few nights before. Why had she ever warned him, in the first place? Why had she come to let him out the *carcel*? That debt angered him. And why had she sent him away on an errand of life and death only to treat him like a felon while he was gone? The more he thought of it the heavier became his chest and the tightness about his heart caused an acute pain. The

chill indifference that had brought him north had melted away. But this hurt that followed his indifference was worse than anything else could have been.

He strode back and forth in the road in an unconscious effort to work off the pain that had accumulated and become dammed up during the past few days, the burning sense of injustice. No, he could not stay in this country, much as he loved it. The very name of Santa Fe would always be connected with Consuelo. Her lovely face was the first he had seen as he entered the Villa, and the last. If he did not put her sharply out of his mind now it would be the last that he carried out of the West.

She had played fast and loose with so fine a gentleman as Tiburcio de Garcia, he told himself, not asking why. Her family meant more to her than anything else could—her family pride. Who were these dons of New Mexico, anyway, that did not look down on trade as did the old French aristocrats of New Orleans? They had no scruples about trade. But he, Steyen Mercer, came from a line of traders who had scoured the Seven Seas; from Caracas to Cuba, from China to Bombay, from Leavenworth to New Mexico.

In a rage he strode down the street and turned in at a brightly lighted little place whence came

the sounds of music and dancing. Doña Magdalena de Archibec knew how to entertain. Always there was music in her place, a bright-eyed *muchacha* or two to dance or to be merry with, tables for cards and lotto. The place was merry tonight indeed. There were more than the usual number of trappers and pleasure-loving youths, who frolicked on the eve of Easter, now that Good Friday had passed. A solitary fiddler with but one leg, who sat with his chair tilted back against the wall, threw back his head, closed his eyes, and played all that he saw in his soul. A girl called Rosita slipped smilingly into a chair beside Steven, where he sat at the end of the room. She smiled close into his face and laid a very soft hand over his, humming gay little airs that followed the fiddle like a happy soul singing with a sad one.

"You are too sad, señor," Rosita laughed in a sweet, hoarse voice.

She soothed him, reminded him vaguely of some one else. Other men came up to dance with her, but she waved them away. "No, no; he is sad. I must to cheer him. . . . Why are you sad?" she begged. "Girl, no?"

Steven made as if to rise from the table, but her expression showed that she was hurt, that her face was that of a tender child. He sat down again.

"What would you do," he asked, "if you had done everything that some one asked of you, and then after you had risked life and all, asking nothing, found that she had let you be blamed for something you did not do, something—well, a thief, a low common thief? It was a lie, even though a silent lie."

"Perhaps there was a reason," offered Rosita, sympathetically. "I do not always tell the truth. My papa he does not know that I dance here. He would be most unhappy that I dance to make money, and sing for strange men. Yet it is very nice. I make silver money. I take it to my mamma, my papa—he is crippled, can never walk—and to the eight *niños*. I tell the lie to my parents. Why make them sad? Alas! they must think the streets of Taos are paved with gold or silver that I can find so much money sweeping and washing the dishes for the *padrona*!" She smiled a trifle sadly, and then both of them laughed. A fat, pock-marked Mexican boy came for her and she rose to whirl in solemn circles with him.

A hand touched Steven upon the shoulder. It was Pierre. "Some one asks for you outside," he said, "a lady. She waits before the house of Ceran St. Vrain, seated upon a white horse."

Steven stared at him almost uncomprehend-

ingly; but he rose to his feet and followed Pierre out into the moonlight. Consuelo sat atop her white horse, saddled bravely with the chair saddle of red Spanish leather. She gazed down at him anxiously. Her face looked very small and white beneath her dark reboso. As Steven advanced and stood at her stirrup, an Indian guide who had been waiting beside her touched heels to his horse and rode on up the road.

“Ess-tevan,” she whispered, “I have come after you—to tell you—what in Santa Fe you would not hear. I am so, so sorry for all. It was wrong of me, I see, to be thinking of Luis, but I did not think of him only. I thought—that you loved the Americana, Ope Bragdon, and that you would for her sake be glad to go into the desert, as well as for the child. And about the—the picture. I could not tell my father.” Her voice broke, stopped. There was no word from Steven. She found a sobbing breath and hurried on. “You do not know how he would take such things. He is too proud. I could only wait and pray. Father Filemon Hubert said that it was right, that all would come right. How I have wept.

“Even now, that the painting is back again, my father has had a stroke. He could not bear it, to know about Luis. And Luis—he has gone away from home. We have not seen him since

the night you were with us." It was too much. She had said bravely all that there was to say, with no help from Steven. He was standing with bowed head at her side.

Then he lifted his face and spoke, wonderingly and ashamed: "And you came all this way across the mountains just to tell me, worthless and hasty as I have been, about it all, when I would not even stay to listen." He raised his arms, lifted her down from the saddle, and carried her like a child into St. Vrain's house, and did not stop till he had set her down before the fire in the brightly lighted room. He asked for a room and food for the lady, and while people flew in all directions to bring hot coffee and broth, Steven with eyes for nothing else leaned above her and whispered, "Consuelo, Consuelo."

All the trappers and rough hunters in their shaggy sheepskins, their coon caps, their fringed and soiled buckskins, arose and filed quietly out and down the street to Magdalena de Archibec's.

Steven knew now that the thing he most wanted was to stay in the mountains, to trade with New Mexico and to mingle in the company of Indians and fighters, of traders and exploring trappers. Not to Chihuahua would his pilgrimage be, to buy brocades and bracelets of garnets for his sweetheart, as the young swains of New

Spain were wont, to show their valor, braving Indians and deserts—but to New Orleans, where one day he would take his bride to the home of his parents. He hung about her neck a riband from which dangled the tiny silver wagon of the caravans.

“Next year we shall travel with them, *verdad?*”

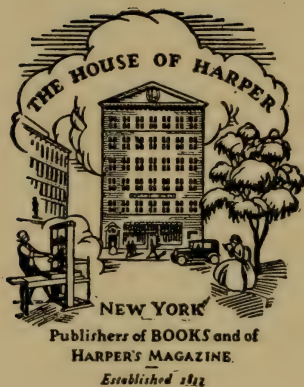
While they waited for the fraile to come over from his house, whither Ceran St. Vrain had sent to fetch him, Consuelo lifted a radiant face, dewy with tears. “And our house shall be furnished not from Chihuahua, not from Spain, but from America, and the bodegas of Mercer & Son.”

De Despedida

And so Steven and Consuelo lived in the land of the Red Trail's end and built for the coming empire from the East. Though the Trail was crimsoned for a quarter of a century afterward with the blood of pioneers, and the prairies encarnadined with the dying buffalo, still the silver caravans came. Over the Red Trail Consuelo and Steven traveled in their youth, again in middle life, to find upon their return a Santa Fe which was now within the borders of the United States, an American territory. When civil war divided North and South and the house of Mercer & Co.

came to ruin, Steven in his maturity knew why he had left home, and his father and mother, to found a new fortune.

Steven did not live to see the snorting iron horse steam along the banks of the Arkansas. And the city which was first to be founded, three centuries before, by the Conquistadores of Old Spain was the last to be relinquished by Spanish-speaking rulers, to learn the tongue of new conquerors and become one of the United States. Yet had it not been for Bent, St. Vrain, Hope and Don Tiburcio, Consuelo and Steven, the Villa de Santa Fe would never have rendered herself peacefully over to the Americans.



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